

Alienation and Militancy in the Niger Delta: A Response to CSIS on Petroleum, Politics, and Democracy in Nigeria

By Oronto Douglas, Von Kemedi, Ike Okonta, and Michael Watts | July 2003

In the wake of the September 11th attack and the Iraq war, Nigeria's geopolitical significance to the U.S. has come into sharper relief. In March and April 2003, militancy across the Niger Delta radically disrupted oil production in this major oil supplier nation. News of these actions, following conflict-ridden national elections, has reinforced the notion that Nigeria and the new West African "gulf states" in general are matters of U.S. national security.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) weighed in on these events in the May 2003 edition of its publication *CSIS Africa Notes*. Since it is one of the most influential Washington think tanks, CSIS analysis matters in the formation of U.S. foreign policy. The brief article "Alienation and Militancy in Nigeria's Niger Delta" by Esther Cesarz, Steve Morrison, and Jennifer Cooke will command attention and this merits a serious response.

As the authors properly say, the recent oil crisis highlights "more profound national challenges" now facing the reelected President Obasanjo and his government. In their view, the recent conflicts in the Niger Delta mark a watershed, distinguished in particular by the prospects of "an upward spiral of violence." The new levels of weaponry and criminal activity on the part of a "frustrated and angry youth" suggest "new ambitions and capacities" among the Ijaw, who have taken on the characteristics of an armed militia. The authors see the specter of Colombia now haunting Nigeria. U.S. companies, they believe, will become targets of terrorist activity, and Nigeria's national stability and cohesion will be threatened.

We believe that this account is wrong-headed on a number of accounts. It misdiagnoses the nature of the political crisis in the Niger Delta, fails to understand the political dynamics of the Ijaw and minority politics in general, and makes unsubstantiated comparisons with the likes of Aceh and Colombia. Rather astonishingly, it also ignores the role of some key actors, the oil companies foremost among them. And it downplays a number of fundamental political problems that need to be faced.

The article does mention several of the key issues in passing, including federalism, resource allocation, and minority rights. But it gives these issues short shrift, while inflating the threat of a new terrorist menace. It thereby potentially helps to set the stage for an excessive military

response or even a new round of ethnic cleansing. An adequate response to Nigeria's problems requires a serious analysis of the country's historical and political context, which we will try to provide below.

The Niger Delta and U.S. National Security

A year before the events of September 11, 2001, the U.S. Department of State in its annual encyclopedia of global terrorism identified the Niger Delta—the geographical heart of oil production in Nigeria—as a breeding ground for militant and "impoverished ethnic groups" involved in numerous terrorist acts (abduction, hostage taking, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killings).¹ A CIA report published in 2000 warned that "environmental stresses" in the oil-rich southern delta could deepen "political tensions" at a time when Nigeria—currently the world's sixth largest producer of petroleum—was supplying almost 14% of U.S. petroleum needs.² Throughout the last decade or so, Nigeria has supplied an average of 8-10% of U.S. oil imports. During the next decade, as its deep-water fields are exploited (and as new reserves are discovered), Nigeria's annual production could exceed that of Venezuela or Kuwait. Nigeria had, of course, become an archetypal oil nation by the 1970s. Oil revenues currently provide 80% of government income, 95% of export receipts, and 90% of foreign exchange earnings.

African Oil and U.S. National Security

The geopolitical significance of Nigerian oil to the U.S., particularly against the global backdrop of rising prices, tight markets, and political instability in the Persian Gulf, Indonesia, and parts of Latin America, is widely understood. Even before the September 11th attacks, the



Petroleum Finance Company (PFC), testifying in Congress before the International Relations Subcommittee on Africa, reported on the strategic and growing security significance of West African oil. In the view of the PFC, West Africa's high-quality reserves and low-cost output, coupled with massive new deep-water discoveries, required serious attention and substantial foreign investment. In the wake of the Al-Qaeda attacks and the Gulf War, Nigeria and West African producers have emerged as "the new Gulf oil states."³ By January 2002 the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies provided a forum for the Bush administration to declare that African oil is "a priority for U.S. national security."⁴ In the last year, the ugly footprint of Africa's black gold in Gabon, São Tomé, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea has rarely been off the front pages. It is also haunted by the specter of terror; the "nightmare" as the *New York Times* noted of "sympathizers of Osama bin Laden sink[ing] three oil tankers in the Straits of Hormuz."⁵

Oil Corruption High; Living Standards Low

The mythos of oil wealth has been central to the history of modern industrial capitalism. But in Nigeria, as elsewhere, the discovery of oil, and annual oil revenues of \$40 billion currently, has ushered in a miserable, undisciplined, decrepit, and corrupt form of "petro-capitalism." After a half century of oil production, almost \$300 billion in oil revenues has flowed directly into the federal exchequer (and perhaps \$50 billion promptly flowed out, only to disappear overseas). Yet Nigerian per capita income stands at \$290 per year. For the majority of Nigerians, living standards are no better now than at independence in 1960. A repugnant culture of excessive venality and profiteering among the political class—the Department of State has an entire website devoted to fraud cases—has won for Nigeria the dubious honor of #1 in Transparency International's ranking of most corrupt states.

Paradoxically, the oil-producing states within federated Nigeria have benefited the least from oil wealth. Devastated by the ecological costs of oil spillage and the highest gas flaring rates in the world, the Niger Delta is a political tinderbox. A generation of militant restive youth, deep political frustrations among oil-producing communities, and pre-electoral thuggery all prosper in the rich soil of political marginalization. Massive election rigging across the Niger Delta in the April 2003 elections simply confirmed the worst for the millions of Nigerians who have suffered from decades of neglect. It was the great Polish

journalist, Kapucinski, who noted in his meditation on oil-rich Iran: "Oil creates the illusion of a completely changed life, life without work, life for free.... The concept of oil expresses perfectly the eternal human dream of wealth achieved through lucky accident...In this sense oil is a fairy tale and, like every fairy tale, a bit of a lie."⁶ It is this lie that currently confronts West African oil producers and the Niger Delta in particular.

Oil Violence

Since March 12, 2003, mounting communal violence has resulted in at least 50 deaths and the leveling of eight communities in and around the Warri petroleum complex. Seven oil company employees have also been killed, prompting all the major oil companies to withdraw staff, to close down operations, and to reduce output by over 750,000 barrels per day (almost half of national output). President Obasanjo has dispatched large troop deployments to the oil-producing creeks. Ijaw militants, incensed over illegal oil bunkering (in which the security forces were implicated) and indiscriminate military action, have threatened to detonate 11 captured oil installations.

The strikes on the offshore oil platforms—a long-festering sore that is rarely mentioned in the media—were quickly resolved. Nobody seriously expects, however, that the deeper problems within the oil sector will go away. Relatively new to delta politics, however, is a series of assassinations, most notably that of Chief Marshall Harry, a senior member of the main opposition party and a leading campaigner for greater resource allocation to the oil-producing Niger Delta. Fallout from the Harry assassination has already become a source of tension in his native oil-producing state of Rivers. Supporters of the main opposition party, the ANPP, and another opposition grouping of activists and politicians, the Rivers Democratic Movement, have linked the ruling party to the assassination.

The Niger Delta stands at the crossroads of contemporary Nigerian politics. Despite the 13% growth of oil revenues to the delta states, the region remains desperately poor. The resultant deepening material and political grievances place the Niger Delta at the confluence of four pressing national issues in the wake of the April 2003 elections: 1) the efforts led by a number of delta states for resource control, which in effect means expanded local access to oil revenues, 2) the struggle for self-determination of minority people and the clamor for a sovereign national conference to rewrite the federal Constitution, 3) a crisis of rule in the region, as a number of state and local governments are rendered helpless by militant youth

movements, growing insecurity, and intracommunity, interethnic, and state violence, and 4) the emergence of what is called a South-South Alliance linking Nigeria's hitherto-excluded oil-producing states in a bulwark against the ethnic majorities.

A Threshold Crossed?

The CSIS article suggests that the current crisis in the Niger Delta represents a threshold increase in violence that threatens Nigeria's national government. This contention must be placed in the larger context of recent history, especially since the end of military rule. Obasanjo's presidential victory in 1999, in the wake of the darkest period of military dictatorship in Nigeria's 40-year, post-independence history, held much promise. An internationally recognized statesman and diplomat imprisoned during the brutal Abacha years, Obasanjo inherited the mantle of a massively corrupt state apparatus, an economy in shambles, and a federation crippled by longstanding ethnic enmity. Entrusted with reforming the corrupt, undisciplined, and largest military in Africa and committed to deepening the process of democratization, Obasanjo was confronted within months of his inauguration by militant ethnic groups speaking the language of self-determination, local autonomy, and resource control (meaning a greater share of federally allocated oil revenues). In an incident widely condemned by the human rights community, some 2,000 persons were slaughtered at Odi in the state of Bayelsa, after federal troops were dispatched in response to clashes between local militants and the police. Obasanjo has consistently refused to apologize for the murders, and there has been no full inquiry. Last year the military was involved in yet another massacre, this time in the Middle Belt in the states of Benue and Taraba intervening in the most serious communal conflict since the clashes that preceded the outbreak of the Biafran civil war in 1967. Thus, under President Obasanjo's watch, over 10,000 people have perished in ethnic violence, and he has failed miserably to address the human rights violations committed by the notoriously corrupt Nigerian security forces.

In Nigeria several glaring deficits compromise the institutions of democratic rule. A broad consensus believes that the 1999 Constitution is deeply flawed. Crafted by

the departing soldiers, the Constitution provides no opportunity for ordinary Nigerians to debate what they consider to be the central conundrum of the national crisis: the terms of association in a multiethnic polity. Ethnic militias arose and communal vigilante politics flourished during the Abacha years (1993-98), when Nigerians experienced the most severe political repression and economic hardship in the country's history. The O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC) for example was established in the Yoruba speaking Southwest in 1994 largely to protest the annulment of the 1993 elections, in which Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba Muslim, had seemingly won the presidency. Led by disenchanted and impoverished youth, the OPC claimed that a "Northern cabal" in the Army had denied Abiola victory, and the organization aggressively pressed for Yoruba political autonomy. Two vigilante groups, the Bakassi Boys and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB),

emerged in the Igbo speaking Southeast two years later. MASSOB claimed that the Nigerian state and its functionaries had systematically oppressed the Igbo since the end of the civil war. This movement sought to secure self-determination by resuscitating the Republic of Biafra, whose bid to secede from the federation was crushed by

Nigerian troops in 1970. Then the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) emerged in the North in 1999 as a reaction to the killing of Northern elements in Lagos and other Yoruba cities and towns by OPC cadres and as a foil to the new Obasanjo government, which many Northerners viewed as a "Yoruba regime." The APC claimed that the harassment of Northerners in the Southwest was part of a Yoruba plan to secede and establish an O'odua Republic. It further alleged that President Obasanjo was sympathetic to the OPC's goals and that the North would go to war if necessary to prevent national dismemberment. These and other ethnic forces have come to play a transformative role in political life largely as party thugs, enforcers, and champions of local interests.

The current crisis in Warri, where 3,000 Nigerian troops have been deployed to "restore law and order," cannot be grasped without understanding these powerful ethnic tensions and political deficits. The profile of a militant faction of Ijaw youth has been unjustly amplified to justify the size of the military deployment. Reports from refugees fleeing the creeks indicate that the military is engaged in

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scorched-earth violence designed, like the Odi massacre, “to teach the Ijaws a lesson.” There have been conflicting accounts of the immediate cause of the violence. One account is linked to a disagreement between elements of the Nigerian military and an oil baron over the proceeds of illegal oil bunkering. Central to the Warri crisis, however, is poverty amidst unimaginable oil wealth. The oil-producing communities do seek to control “their oil.” But this legitimate claim is refracted through the lens of ethnic difference, as Urhobo, Ijaw, and Itsekiri people struggle over the delineation of electoral wards (as a precondition to claim state oil revenues) and overlapping claims on oil-rich land. Warring factions and the Army have thus been responsible for many deaths and the destruction of scores of communities.

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It would be naïve to deny the growing violence in the Niger Delta and the extent to which democratization has deepened the ethnic spoils politics that have been central to the political landscape of post-colonial Nigeria. But it is far too apocalyptic to read into these troubling trends some sort of historical precipice over which Nigeria is about to tumble.

Bigger Ambitions, Better Capacities?

Even as Ijaw leaders have worked to address pressing problems in their immediate locality—the Niger Delta—their focus has always been national. In 1958, on the eve of formal independence, the British set up the Willink Commission to inquire into the fears of Nigeria’s ethnic minority groups. The Ijaw leaders’ submission to the commission called for a more inclusive federal state in which they would enjoy the fruits and obligations of full citizenship. Thus they framed their grievances in terms of the national arena as the audience and site of struggle. Such issues as flaws in the electoral process, resentment of Nigeria’s national Army, and inequities in the allocation of oil receipts have engaged the attention of Ijaw leaders since the late 1950s. The politics of the Eastern region were then dominated by a single political party (the NCNC). It not only had centralizing ambitions but also excluded significant ethnic minorities, including the Ijaw, from the regional government, which was the source and distributor of patronage and strategic resources. Indeed, questions concerning Nigeria’s fundamentally flawed political process, whether in the guise of military rule or electoral politics, have topped the agenda in the Niger Delta ever since oil

became a significant player in the country’s political economy. These grievances now appear to be new because the terrain of struggle has, since May 1999, shifted from a vicious military dictatorship that sought to stifle all legitimate dissent by clamping down on civil society to an elected civilian government still dominated by a single political party. The latter does, however, offer some room for mobilized communities and interest groups, including Ijaw leaders and militants, to press their demands on the state.

There is no reliable evidence to support the claim that Ijaw militants have displayed new lethal capacities and a willingness to use them. The events of March 2003 in the Warri area were merely an escalation of a longstanding grievance over the delineation of electoral wards, which Ijaw leaders consider deliberately skewed in favor of the Itsekiri. Clashes between Ijaw and Itsekiri militants have been ongoing since the late 1990s as a result of this perceived injustice. The explosion of violence on the eve of the April 2003 elections was fundamentally the handiwork of rival local politicians desperate for success in the polls and mobilizing all available resources, including festering grievances like the electoral ward issue, to achieve their objectives.

The parochial objectives of self-serving politicians inflame the wider strategic self-determination goals of Ijaw leaders and militias alike when funds are disbursed to the militias. Yet, there is nothing to suggest that these developments represent a fundamental departure from the previous trajectory of political agitation in the area. Machine guns, satellite phones, and speedboats are standard items in the arsenal of military troops deployed by the Nigerian state to pacify the oil-producing communities. Royal Dutch/Shell and the other oil companies also supply weapons, through a variety of sophisticated fronts, to security operatives and mercenaries (including local youth) that they retain in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian state and the oil companies have thus been colluding to contain the legitimate demands of the Ijaw by militarizing the Niger Delta. The glut of arms in the delta, warrants urgent concern, but one must first appreciate the problem’s origins and dynamic links to state and corporate actors.

Recent media reports drawing attention to a “weaponized” Ijaw and to vengeful and bloodthirsty militants are a classic case of giving the dog a bad name in order to hang it. The claim that Ijaw militants are now deliberately targeting and killing oil workers is precarious.

Some oil workers were caught in the crossfire, as Ijaw and Itsekiri insurgents battled for supremacy in Warri last March. It is, however, significant that the deceased were killed, not in the oil fields, but in the Warri urban area itself. Though kidnapping of oil workers for ransom is a favored tactic of the militants, abuse and killing are rare. Working in isolated flow stations in the dense delta swamps, poorly guarded oil company personnel are very vulnerable and would be easy targets for these militias, were it a new policy to target and kill them. However, there are, as yet, no independent and credible media reports of mass killings of these oil workers in the Niger Delta. Indeed, history suggests that these sorts of rumors and insinuations—with oil corporations taking out full-page advertisements in the Nigerian dailies suggesting a descent into terrorism—serve to portray a fully armed and dangerous Ijaw militia out for blood and set the stage for yet another cycle of ethnic cleansing reminiscent of Odi.

Oil Companies Getting a Pass

What is most strikingly missing from current discussions (including the CSIS brief) of the security problems in the Niger Delta is the role of Shell and other powerful corporate international actors in deepening and sustaining the crisis. Several independent human rights organizations, most notably Human Rights Watch, have linked the oil company to the spate of killings, rapes, and intercommunal feuds that have crippled social and economic life in the Niger Delta since 1993. These human rights groups have also detailed the company's links to powerful and corrupt Nigerian state officials. Moreover, environmental groups have documented the company's unrelenting attack on the human ecosystem on which the local communities rely for sustenance. The fact that a case against Chevron was recently heard in San Francisco Federal Court speaks powerfully to these issues of corporate practice. Indeed, detailed local community studies in Nembe, Peremabiri, and Ke/Bille have documented the need for new forms of corporate accountability.⁷ Yet, not a single industrialized country consuming Shell's oil has called for sanctions to be imposed on the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta. Any serious attempt to address the problem of alienation and militancy in Nigeria must focus globally, not just on the Niger Delta.

A New Colombia?

Amidst the political corruption, the deepening crisis of governance, and the escalating violence related to resource control, does it make sense, as the CSIS brief suggests, to draw a parallel between a "better-positioned Ijaw" and the

revolutionary violence associated with FARC and the ELN in Colombia? There are parallels between the two countries regarding the political economy of extraction. Colombia has emerged since the mid-1980s as a significant oil producer (oil revenues now account for 35% of legal exports) and a significant supplier to the U.S. oil market. Conflicts between indigenous communities—notably the U'wa—and the state and multinational oil companies are legion. And the links between the military, corporate security, and resource extraction—what can best be understood as a militarized oil complex—are structurally analogous to the situation in Nigeria. But both Colombia and Nigeria have to be grasped regionally (Colombia within the Andean oil region, and Nigeria within the West African petro-zone).

It is one thing to say that the Ijaw and the U'wa have "raised the stakes" and can "embarrass government," but it is quite another matter to see "Delta ethnic militants" as Maoist insurgents or terrorists. First, the Colombian situation is a longstanding civil war compounded by both narco-traffic and oil. Political violence of many sorts is legendary in Colombia and long predates the emergence of oil as a strategic national resource. Second, the fundamental role of the armed forces in Colombia cannot be grasped outside of the catalytic role played by the drug economy and by the massive military assistance provided by the United States. During the 1990s Colombia became a major recipient of U.S. foreign military aid, and in July 2000 Washington's "Plan Colombia" committed \$1.3 billion toward an antinarcotics counterinsurgency strategy.

The role of the military in Nigeria (and its relation to the oil industry in particular) is obviously key, but there is (thus far) no parallel to the external militarization found in Colombia. President Clinton did commit foreign assistance to "reprofessionalize" the Nigerian Army in 1999, including the equipping and training of seven battalions at a cost of over \$1 billion. During the Bush imperium, the presence of 200 Special Forces in Nigeria, including on-site training grounds in some of the most sensitive areas of the Muslim North, has generated enormous suspicion and now vocal opposition. Not unexpectedly, a number of powerful Nigerian constituencies see a beleaguered and corrupt Obasanjo regime as simply another miserable U.S. oil colony. However, this is in no way comparable to the Colombian case, where the U.S. was directly backing a war with financial support that was to be used for combat.

Third, the extreme violence of the Colombian case stems from the fact that Washington, in conjunction with the Colombian military, has provided direct support to pro-

tect oil installations (most recently \$98 million in February 2002 by the Bush administration to protect the Canon Limon pipeline). This protection is only part of a combination of armed insurgents, right-wing paramilitaries, and so-called legal mercenaries (known as contractors) who operate symbiotically with the likes of Occidental Oil and Ecopetrol. Although certain elements of this mix are present in the Nigerian situation, there is a qualitative difference between their roles in the two countries.

And finally, to see in the variety of Ijaw (or other ethnic) movements the seeds of leftist revolution is quite preposterous. Disenfranchised youth groups have acted in violent ways, especially in conflicted oil-producing communities like Nembe and Peremabiri, and the presence of a secondary arms market has transformed the nature of the violence itself. But to suggest that Ijaw ethnic militancy is secessionist, either as a leftist insurgency or as a provocation portending massive civil war, is misguided. These Ijaw activists, like the Ogoni political movement (MOSOP) and the Chicoco movement, are actively engaged in debates about access to and control over resources within the federation. They seek to modify the Nigerian Constitution, and they wrangle over what it means to be a full citizen. The fact that massive poverty, disenfranchisement, and a long, dark history of military violence should produce forms of politics that are neither civil nor democratic should surprise no one. But to see in the seeds of Ijaw mobilization a “New Terror” is a radical misreading of the current political moment in the Niger Delta.

The Way Out

The strategic significance of Nigeria is incontestable. One of every five Africans is a Nigerian. Nigeria is also the world's seventh-largest exporter of petroleum and a key player in African regional security, most recently in Sierra Leone. And Nigeria is home to a vast Muslim community. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, political power has shifted from the conservative Sufi brotherhoods to well-organized modern Islamist groups like the Yan Izala, founded in 1978. Shari'a law, of a dogmatic and literalist sort, has been adopted and implemented in 12 of the populous Northern states, amidst considerable political acrimony and international censure. At least 350 people were killed in four days of rioting in northern Nigeria triggered by protests against U.S. military action in Afghanistan. There were particularly bloody clashes between Muslims and Christians in Kano, Kaduna, and Jos. The September 2002 debacle surrounding the Miss World pageant, in which religious controversy and political violence resulted in the competition

being moved from Abuja to London, signaled the extent to which religion has entered the political arena.

The Obasanjo government, torn between championing a united Nigeria and accommodating powerful pro-federal and ethnic autonomy sentiments among key constituencies, has been unable to articulate a coherent policy to contain the conflict raging in the Niger Delta. The advent of electoral politics has even deepened the appeal of various mouth-pieces for popular grievances, including the ethnic militias, in the face of the central government's dismal failure to tackle pressing economic and social problems. Ethnic militias, intercommunal violence, and the resurgent cries for a sovereign national conference, true federalism, and resource control all speak to a sort of tectonic fissure now separating state and society. Above all there is a profound sense that the democratic space in Nigeria is neither large nor deep enough to accommodate the clamor for regional and local autonomy or any new political entitlements. Nigerians remain, despite the democratic dispensation, subjects rather than citizens. Any way out must, in our view, address the citizenship question at a number of levels.

Oil Is Key

The first issue to be addressed is how the pursuit of oil wealth underlies persistent national policy failures in Nigeria. Since 1970, the country's political, economic, and policy elites have established an authoritarian power structure to enable them to centralize control of strategic resources, including the country's substantial oil deposits. Such avarice has not only banished the great majority of ordinary Nigerians from the policymaking process, but it has also led the power elites to pursue social and economic strategies that are shortsighted, self-serving, and not driven by the needs of the people. The consequences have been material scarcity, deepening frustration, and social unrest in the Niger Delta and elsewhere.

The government focus should instead be on achieving a just and sustainable political order, giving due weight to the fears, needs, and aspirations of the various social and interest groups in the country. There is a growing consensus that a completely unitary system of government is not suited to a socially diverse country like Nigeria. A federal democracy, turning on a measured dose of fiscal autonomy for the federating units, not unlike the provisions of the country's independence Constitution, is recommended. This would help diversify Nigeria's revenue base by enhancing domestic taxation, as non-oil-producing areas are forced to find alternative ways to boost the exchequer.

A Path to Democracy

An economically diversified polity would also tend to introduce into the policymaking process, non-oil players whose interests would serve as a check on the political elites and their cronies, curbing the powerful drive toward political authoritarianism. Political federalism would spawn new social forces throughout Nigeria that could serve as a countervailing force as they press their own demands on the state. Democracy would be enhanced, as these different sets of actors with diverse social and economic bases competed on a level playing field. And because no one group would be powerful enough to dominate the state and use its organs to pursue its narrow interests, the need for the institutionalization of a disinterested and efficient public service, corruption-free public agencies, due process, and the rule of law would be more compelling. Those running for office in Nigeria's elected government would need to be willing to tackle the structural causes of endemic violence and mass poverty in a political economy in which oil currently contaminates virtually everything. In the absence of robust democratic institutions and a meaningful sense of citizenship, another oil boom—secured perhaps with the heavy artillery of American empire—will only further tear Nigeria apart.

The second issue involves Nigeria's social contract. In order for a federal democracy to be meaningful to ordinary Nigerians and to address their social and economic needs, a new compact between state and society will have to be worked out. The civic, political, and social rights of the people will need to be not only clearly spelled out but also made legally enforceable. A socially and economically empowered body politic would eagerly participate in public affairs, and such broad and active participation by an enlightened citizenry is the secret of good government policy.

More than 40 years ago, the Willink Commission noted that the Niger Delta was “poor, backward and neglected.” In the wake of several insurrections, including a devastating civil war and nine military coups, all linked to the scramble for the oil resources of the Niger Delta, the communities and the people are no better off than they were in 1958. To the people of the Niger Delta, who over the years have clamored for a space in the Nigerian sun, resources are not limited to oil and gas, despite the corporate and govern-

mental scramble for control over those riches. To the indigenous people, resources mean primarily land for agriculture, waters for fishing, forests for harvesting, and air for breathing, as well as other physical and spiritual biota.

Resource control is the term used to describe decision-making power over a people's source of livelihood. In the case of the Niger Delta, these sources of survival have been taken away violently, undemocratically, and unjustly. The term denotes the need to regain ownership, control, use, and management of resources primarily for the benefit of the communities and people on whose land the resources originate

and secondarily for the good governance and development of the entire country. The refusal of successive Nigerian governments to protect the land and people of the Niger Delta from the hazards of hydrocarbon extraction—such as oil spillages and seepages, human rights violations, and poverty—seems to have convinced the people that the oil-military-governmental troika is not good for them or the country. Ironically it is the Willink

Commission report—a colonial period document that remains ignored even as Nigeria's communities clamor for true federalism—that could give local authorities significant leverage in holding government and corporations accountable for malfeasances that affect present and future survival.

The solution to the resource conflict in the Niger Delta does not lie with the government alone. The government is an interested party. Avowedly entrenched in resource extraction and revenue politics, the present Nigerian government, like others before it, sees no other solution but military pacification and legalism. However, the problem is political and stems from Olusegun Obasanjo's first appearance as the head of a military junta that seized control of land in Nigeria between 1976 and 1979. That military junta granted multinational oil companies access to the Niger Delta and helped bury true federalism in multiethnic, multireligious Nigeria. In modern-day Nigeria, issues of environmental security, resource control and management, corporate liability for environmental damage and human rights violations, and livelihood erosion are in danger of being buried beneath the global search for “international networks of criminality and violence.” The grave danger, then, at this moment in history, is that such a misreading of the politics of the Niger Delta and of the struggle for environ-

Since 1970, the country's political, economic, and policy elites have established an authoritarian power structure to enable them to centralize control of strategic resources.

mental and social justice will stigmatize Africa's major oil-producing region as simply another site in which terrorism must be eradicated by any means possible.

The third festering issue in the need for effective mediation at the community level to address the variety of intra- and intercommunity violence. Mediation, de-escalation, and intercession are indeed very central to addressing not only the Warri crisis but also the many other community conflicts in the Niger Delta. Any effective effort in this direction must be facilitated by an impartial party with no vested interest. Because the oil companies and the federal government are the most important factors driving interethnic and intercommunity conflicts, these entities must also be willing to submit to a mediation process. Urging their good-faith participation in the process and in efforts to restore federalism and resource control should take precedence over admonitions that the federal government "will need to take swift and meaningful steps to enhance the region's security."⁸ Emphasizing the latter risks playing into the hands of hawks within the Nigerian federal government and military who seek to continue the rape, looting, mass destruction, and genocide that they started in Umuchem, Ogoni, Kaima, Yenagoa, Odi, and numerous other communities.

The final issue to be addressed is the impact of international players. Even though the current situation in the Niger Delta does not resemble Colombia, there is no reason to believe that it never could. A militarization of the West African oil region under the aegis of an American Empire intent on rooting out terrorism, as outlined in Washington's September 2002 *National Security Strategy*, would contribute directly to a "Colombianization" of the Niger Delta. Unless there is serious pressure from both U.S. and European governments to ensure accountability

and responsibility from the oil companies—many of whom are now anxious to get out of the business of community development in Nigeria—the sense of historical grievance that is widespread across the Niger Delta will continue to fester.

The annals of oil extraction are an uninterrupted chronicle of naked aggression, exploitation, and the violent mores of the corporate frontier. Iraq was born from this vile trinity. The current spectacle of oil men parading through the corridors of the White House, the rise of militant Islam across the *Q'uran* belt, and the carnage on the road to Baghdad all bear the continuing dreadful dialectics of blood and oil. Nigeria suffers all the hallmarks of such petro-violence. Breaking with this bloody history will require a major political commitment on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Notes

- 1 Available at <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/pgtrpt/2000/>.
- 2 Available at <http://www.eia.gov/emeu/cabs/nigeria.html>.
- 3 Jean-Christophe Servant, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 13, 2003.
- 4 Available at: <http://www.iasps.org/>.
- 5 Neela Banerjee, "Fears, Again, of Oil Supplies at Risk," *New York Times*, October 14th, 2001. Business Section III, p.1.
- 6 R. Kapucinski, *Shah of Shabs*. (New York: Harcourt. 1982). p.34.
- 7 V. Kemedi, "Oil on troubled waters," in *Environmental Politics Working Papers* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, UC Berkeley, 2002). Available at <http://globetroter.berkeley.edu/>.

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