



WE THOUGHT IT WAS OIL, BUT IT WAS BLOOD

**RESISTANCE TO THE MILITARY-CORPORATE
WEDLOCK IN NIGERIA AND BEYOND**

Nnimmo Bassey



*“The other day
We danced on the street
Joy in our hearts
We thought we were free
Three young folks fell to our right
Countless more fell to our left
Looking up,
Far from the crowd
We beheld
Red hot guns
We thought it was oil
But it was blood”*

– Nnimmo Bassey

Introduction

The colour of oil in much of the world runs red – and nowhere more so than in Nigeria, where fossil-fuels extraction is deeply linked to militarisation and repression. Nigeria's bitter experience in the last century highlights the human and environmental costs of this military-corporate wedlock that could be exacerbated by climate chaos and the resulting race for what's left of our world's natural resources. However, Nigeria's experience also contains seeds of hope, as the environmental aggression of the combined forces of commerce and politics has not gone unchallenged due to strong resistance by impacted oil-field communities and their allies.

Colonial politics, commerce and military adventurism have a long history. Just two examples will suffice here. First was the burning down of Brass in 1895 by a British naval force, to ensure that the Royal Niger Company secured a monopoly over palm-oil trade on the Niger River to the exclusion of local middlemen. An estimated 2,000 people lost their lives in that attack.¹

In more recent years, a special military task force has been in place since 1994, to suppress peaceful protests in Ogoniland against the polluting activities of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). The establishment of what was first named the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force facilitated the military incursion into Ogoni. Their brutal actions in Ogoniland alone led to the death of over 2,000 people² and the flogging, raping and human-rights violations of several others. The current Joint Military Task Force, comprising officers from the army, navy, air force and mobile police, was set up in 2004 to restore or maintain order in the Niger Delta.

Since the occupation of Ogoniland, military presence has become routine in the oil fields of the Niger Delta.

Yet in the face of long-drawn repression, Nigeria also tells a less-known story about how popular movements are resisting the military/corporate/state nexus in Nigeria and Africa. Africans are not simply folding their arms and taking a beating. From around 2002, the women in the Niger Delta have applied a cultural resistance tool sometimes referred to as 'the naked option',³ by baring their breasts in protest against environmental damage, destruction of livelihoods and resultant joblessness in their communities. Facing the military with bared breasts illustrates courage, outrage and rejection of corporations working behind military shields. The women demand a halt to impunity and place a curse on the corporations and their political backers.

We see a similar situation building in other regions of Africa, such as in the oil-field communities in the Lake Albert area of Uganda. Local residents there are using songs and drama to build community resistance and to empower themselves in the struggle against the gradual military buildup in the area.

What lessons can we learn from their struggles? How can resistance and resilience build webs of solidarity in an age when access to feasible livelihoods and supporting environments recede due to destructive extractive activities?

Palm oil to crude oil monopolies

The history of natural resource extraction in the Niger Delta is replete with tales of violence and impunity. In the pre-colonial era, European trading companies obtained treaties from leaders of kingdoms and communities literally at gunpoint. Where the people were unwilling to be drawn into such treaties, the application of brute force was applied. For example, while a July 1884 treaty between the British and the Itsekiri peoples of Western Niger Delta presented itself as a friendly protection treaty, a second treaty signed in 1894 eliminated any pretence to friendship with a threatening ratification article stating,

“[A]nd it is understood that if reasonable and consistent effort be shown by the signatory chiefs to adhere and carry out the terms of it, there will be immunity from punishment from any and all offences which may have been committed against the laws and orders of the Government prior to the signing of it.”⁴

In the Niger Delta, control of palm-oil markets was the initial abiding obsession of British merchants, sometimes known as supercargoes, who would not brook competition either from the locals or from other international companies. Their conflicts with Nigerian leaders led to the deportation and exile of key leaders, such as King Dappa Pepple of Bonny (deported to Fernando Po in 1852) and King Jaja of Opobo (deported to the West Indies in 1887). It also led to the British military being called in to secure their trade monopolies, as seen in the example of the 1895 raid of Brass, the then-chief Ijo town of the Niger Delta.⁵

The major company operating in the Niger Delta was the highly exploitative Royal Niger Company (RNC). The company eventually ‘sold’ the territory to the British Government in 1900, in a manner that relieved it of direct military responsibilities and possibly enhanced its exploitative capacities. The British went ahead to create what they called the Oil Rivers Protectorate (ORP). The ORP was later on integrated with the wider Southern Protectorate. In 1914, the Southern and the Northern Protectorates were amalgamated into what is today known as Nigeria.

This brief look into the trade relations enforced by European trading companies in Nigeria in the 19th century (and even earlier if we consider the slave trade) gives an indication of the brutal and militarised trade relations that continue today. Indeed, the entire dislocation of the Nigerian socio-political system can be traced to resource ownership and control relations fuelled by the prodigious oil fields of the Niger Delta.

The neocolonial economy of Nigeria continues to run on the brutal tracks largely installed by precolonial and colonial players.

It is not surprising, therefore, that its citizens generally see the Nigerian state as representing “a predatory institution, centralising power and access to social and economic goods”.⁶ This rapacious system runs on a pattern of patronage that at the same time silences vocal opposition, divides communities and weakens resistance.

Oil boom ... guns boom

Oil replaced agriculture as the mainstay of the Nigerian economy by the early 1970s. Commercial oil extraction began in 1958 and rose to a production level of 17,000 barrels a day. By 1966, production had risen to 420,000 barrels a day and hit two million barrels a day between 1970 and 1980. The oil boom took place while Nigeria was under military rule⁷ and was running a unitary political system mislabelled a federation. Revenues were centrally collected and distributed based on various formulae.

The revenue sharing formula in the early 1970s was 50 per cent to the region that generated the revenue, 15 per cent to the central government and 35 per cent to the other regions.⁸ The history of revenue sharing⁹ shows that from 1953 to 1958 it was a full 100 per cent to the producing region. This ratio began to change once oil revenue became the Nigerian state’s economic mainstay and was slashed to 50 per cent between 1958 and 1969. It fell to 45 per cent in 1970-71. From 1971 to 1977 the ratio stayed at 45 per cent, but excluded proceeds from offshore activities. It further fell to 25 per cent from 1977 to 1979. From 1979 to 1999 the share that went to producing regions fell to 0 per cent with a full 100 per cent going to the central government (Federation).

From the Federation’s account tiny slices of between 1.5 to 3 per cent were allocated for special programmes in the oil-producing states. This generated a lot of discontent from the regions suffering gross environmental violence and crimes. And so the government between 1999-2002 allocated 13 per cent of the oil revenue, minus offshore proceeds, to the oil-producing states. In effect, this amounted to a mere 7 per cent of revenue and was resisted by state governments, especially Akwa Ibom State, where the bulk of the oil fields are located offshore. The outcome of that struggle is that from 2002, the 13 per cent derivation formula has included offshore production revenues. This formula was challenged at a National Conference held in Nigeria from March to August 2014. While some argued for an increase of the revenue share to 50 per cent, others demanded a reduction in the amount allocated as well as a reintroduction of the offshore-onshore dichotomy. At the end of the conference the issue of revenue sharing formula was thrown back to the President to set up a technical committee for its resolution. It is clear that the issue of revenue sharing remains politically explosive.

About 69 per cent of the Nigerian population live beneath the headline.¹⁰ Referring to the poverty as endemic in the Niger Delta, the Stakeholder Democracy Network, a Nigerian group, states,

Billions of dollars from oil revenues have been distributed unequally and have not translated into development and basic services for the population. The majority of the Niger Delta inhabitants lack access to basic infrastructure, health and education services as well as job opportunities. High levels of pollution and destruction of traditional means of livelihood increase the vulnerability to poverty in the region. The fundamental conditions of extreme deprivation have remained unchanged for decades and drive cycles of violent conflict.¹¹

Average life expectancy in Nigeria is currently 52 years. In the Niger Delta it is 41 years. Only about 30 per cent of the people in the Niger Delta have access to safe drinking water.¹² By the time Bayelsa State was created in 1996, there were less than 20 km of all-weather roads in the area. In fact, most Niger Delta communities can only be accessed by boats, as there is a deficit of link roads and bridges. This has direct impact on the volume and type of commerce that goes on in the region.¹³ The idea of constructing a major highway linking the Niger Delta states in Nigeria, the East-West Road, was conceived in 2001.¹⁴ It has been under construction since 2006 and is still not nearing completion.

Against this backdrop of endemic poverty, the revenue sharing formula has been the critical bone of contention in the economic as well as the overall socio-political sphere in Nigeria. The political struggles here are about who controls the pot. This has led to a predatory political system where politicians hover over the pot waiting for dollars to drop in and then swoop in to grab what they can. The resulting corrupt system of patronage and wastage has significantly fuelled militarisation, repression and violence.

Environmental destruction and media spin

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) conducted an environmental assessment of the Ogoni environment in 2011. The report validated all the claims of the Ogoni people that the Shell and Nigerian National Petroleum Corporations had ruined their lands and water and everything else. In at least 10 Ogoni communities, drinking water is contaminated with high levels of hydrocarbons, seriously threatening public health. The report also showed that in one community called Nisisioken Ogale, in western Ogoniland, families are drinking water from wells that are contaminated with benzene – a known carcinogen – at levels 900 times above World Health Organisation guidelines. The site is close to a Nigerian National Petroleum Company pipeline. UNEP scientists found an eight-centimetre layer of refined oil floating on the groundwater, which serves the wells. This was reportedly linked to an oil spill, which occurred some years ago.¹⁵ Three years after the release of the report, nothing has been done to begin a cleaning up process – something the UNEP says could take up to 30 years to accomplish.

According to the stipulations of Nigerian law, especially section II(5) of the Oil Pipeline Act of 1958, when oil-field incidents are attributed to third-party interference, the oil company that owns and runs the facility is absolved of the responsibility to compensate local people who may suffer harm as a result of the incidents. Shell and other oil companies operating in the Niger Delta have routinely cashed in on this loophole in the law even before incidents are investigated. This is why the claim that oil spills have been caused by sabotage has become a routine chorus over the past few decades. From a moral standpoint, even where a case of sabotage is established, the oil company still has a duty to clean up the polluted environment.

The National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) Act of 2006 stipulates that the cause of a spill can only be ascertained after a Joint Inspection Visit¹⁶ (JIV) to the scene of the incident is carried out. When oil companies make claims without independent verification, this is clearly a ploy to cover up their tracks and avoid liability.

A press statement by a UNEP official, before their 2011 report was issued, suggested that over 90 per cent of the oil spill incidents in Ogoniland were a result of sabotage. This claim was highly contested by Ogoni people and civil society groups such as the Ogoni Solidarity Forum, Social Action and the Environmental Rights Action through protests and mass mobilisations. When the UNEP report was finally issued, the preposterous claim was not part of their findings.

The oil companies have become masters of spin. For example, in the months leading to the release of the damning UNEP report, Shell embarked on a sustained media campaign, arguing that illegal refineries and oil theft were the major troubles of the Niger Delta. They backed these comments by flying in foreign journalists and taking them on a literal, if aerial, pollution tour of the Niger Delta, showing them spots where illegal refineries were in operation and the accompanying environmental damage. Their claims would appear strong to any visitor and more so for those looking down from the sky. In-depth studies,¹⁷ however, have shown that the illegal bush refineries in the Niger Delta do not have the capacity to use more than 20 per cent of the crude oil that is stolen in the area. However, these studies have received much less public attention due to the power of corporate influence on the media.

The petro-military romance

Oil revenue more or less ensured that the military stayed in power in Nigeria for a cumulative 30-odd years, from 1966 to 1999, with a tiny hiatus between 1979 and 1983. Ever since the oil boom, oil companies operating in Nigeria have done so behind military shields. In other words, the Niger Delta has been effectively under military boots for almost half a century. Moreover, the dawn of democracy has not seen a reduction of

military presence in the region. It did not prevent, for example, a halt to the assaults on communities as the attacks on Odi (1999), Odioma (2005), Gbaramatu (2009) and others illustrate.

One Nigerian Shell corporate executive was famously quoted as saying that corporations like stable business environments and that military dictatorships provide such stability. In his words: “For a commercial company trying to make investments, you need a stable environment ... Dictatorships can give you that.”¹⁸ However, a militarised democracy has proved an equally effective corporate partner.

The symbiotic relationship between the two sectors works in such a way that the corporations can escape or ignore their responsibility to the environment and to the people/communities with the protection of the military. Meanwhile, the military thrives on the conflict that results because it allows them to expand security budgets through which they secure their own posts. In this mutually beneficial relationship the planet and the people get trashed.

With the dominance of military interests, we see the logic that empowers oil companies to treat poor communities with contempt and to meet requests for dialogue from communities with violence. A major game-changer in the history of impunity in the Niger Delta was the military attack on Umuechem community in November 1990, at the request of Shell.¹⁹ The community had reportedly requested a meeting with Shell to raise their concerns over environmental degradation and a dearth of amenities and infrastructure in the community. Shell’s response was to invite in a branch of the Nigerian Police known as the Military Police, or ‘kill-and-go’ in local parlance. It is known for its brutality. At the end of the police attack, some 80 unarmed community people were killed and 495 houses were either destroyed or badly damaged.²⁰

In 2000, the Nigerian AGIP Oil Company (NAOC) commissioned the Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation (ND-HERO) to study and suggest alternative solutions to the use of military in protection of oil facilities. The report²¹ submitted to NAOC in December 2000 reveals some interesting facts about oil company-military relations in the Niger Delta.

- The company first engaged security personnel in early 1980s. They served as ‘supernumerary’ or spy police.
- The spy police watched over the company’s properties and personnel and also reported crimes to the Nigerian police.
- Later on, NAOC employed ex-policemen in the spy force.
- In 1999, NAOC built a “military barracks with full operational logistics outside its Brass Terminal gate for the Nigerian armed forces”.
- NAOC has 100 percent responsibility for the upkeep of the troops guarding their facilities – feeding, accommodating, transporting and paying monthly allowances.

- The soldiers present themselves as the face of the company and shield company officials from the community. They also frequently behave recklessly in the communities, creating fear.
- The communities where NAOC operated saw the stationing of the military in their communities to guard oil facilities as needless and provocative.

While NAOC insisted they were not supplying arms to the military, not all the oil companies can say the same.²² Certainly none could say they have not fuelled aggression against communities by the military. Oil companies have been able to maintain high production levels in the Niger Delta despite the frequent spills and continuing oil thefts in the region. Only at the height of militancy in the Niger Delta did oil production figures drop due to violent responses. Other drops have been when major breaches occur on the pipelines and the companies are forced to declare force majeure.²³

Oil and boots over Africa

The military has played similar roles in other African countries from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial era.²⁴ Although not all military takeovers can be directly traceable to resource struggles, the resource factor has usually contributed to the persistence of usurpers in power. For example, in countries such as the Congo/Zaire, Congo Brazzaville, Chad, Niger, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania, Angola, Uganda and others we see a strong corporate-state-military nexus in control of resources.

The influence of the military in these nations manifests in the restricting of citizens' freedom, including freedom of association and of expression. Moreover it is usually combined with routine neglect and lack of development of the regions. This has fuelled armed resistance for self-determination in such regions.

As in Nigeria, the resource-extracting corporations operate behind military shields. Take the recent example of Uganda. The country announced major oil discovery in 2006,²⁵ and before commercial exports were begun, the signs of heightened militarisation of the oil-rich areas in Uganda were ominous. For a time, it was impossible for visits to be made to the Lake Albert oil fields without prior authorisation from the authorities in Kampala, the nation's capital. It took determined campaigns by civil society groups such as the National Association of Professional Environmentalists (NAPE) and Oilwatch Uganda before freer access was granted.

As Friends of the Earth (FOE) Africa warns, "It is likely that when oil begins to flow, government terror will rise and cases of human rights violations will increase. Those who will demand transparency, rights, accountability and justice will be taken as economic saboteurs and will suffer state terror and brutality."²⁶

In Ghana, meanwhile, fishermen at the Half Assini axis complain that a virtual naval

blockade keeps them from having access to parts of the continental shelf that they traditionally saw as the best fishing grounds. And this military blockage is carried out in the name of securing offshore oil platforms in the area. The story repeats in other regions and locations.

Ecological assault and the rise of resistance in Nigeria

Faced with the militarisation and corporate takeover of Nigeria's natural resources, the struggle by the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta is perhaps one of the best known worldwide. The struggle showed that impacted peoples can confront corporate and state power and succeed in halting continued extractive activities in their territory. The Ogoni people mobilised under the banner of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). The movement grew in influence under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was eventually executed²⁷ by the military on 10 November 1995, for alleged complicity in the murder of four Ogoni chiefs on 21 May 1994.

The Ogoni struggle emerged after a series of ruinous environmental incidents, among other provocations. For example, after a massive oil spill occurred at a facility run by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC or Shell for short) at Ebubu-Ejama village in Ogoniland in 1970, all Shell did was set the crude on fire. The resulting fire raged for weeks, "creating craters six to ten feet deep at various places".²⁸ The crude oil released in that spill is yet to be cleaned in 2014, over 40 years after the incident. The evidence remains fenced up in a parcel of land watched over by Nigerian security forces. The military do not only protect oil workers and their installations, they sometimes guard their crime scenes, as this one attests.

In 1990, the Ogoni people issued the Ogoni Bill of Rights in which they demanded environmental protection, economic benefits, political representation and treatment with respect and dignity within the Nigerian state. The Bill of Rights became an organising document for the Ogoni people and also eventually inspired other ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta to produce similar charters as a peaceful way of prodding the government into dialogue and action. The Bill noted that although crude oil had been extracted from Ogoniland since 1958, they had received nothing in return.

Articles 15-18 of the Bill state:

15. That the search for oil has caused severe land and food shortages in Ogoni – one of the most densely populated areas of Africa (average: 1,500 per square mile; national average: 300 per square mile).

16. That neglectful environmental pollution laws and sub-standard inspection techniques of the Federal authorities have led to the complete degradation of the Ogoni environment, turning our homeland into an ecological disaster.

17. That the Ogoni people lack education, health and other social facilities.

18. That it is intolerable that one of the richest areas of Nigeria should wallow in abject poverty and destitution.

This Bill of Rights was the precursor to the Kaiama Declaration of the Ijaws, Ogoni Bill of Rights, Ikwerre Rescue Charter, Aklaka Declaration for the Egi, the Urhobo Economic Summit Resolution and the Oron Bill of Rights, amongst others.²⁹

The peaceful mobilisation of the Ogoni people reached its apogee in January 1993, when over 300,000 Ogoni gathered to mark the Year of Indigenous People as well as Ogoni Day. On that day, the Ogoni people declared Shell persona non grata in their territory. By that declaration, Shell was expelled from Ogoniland. They have been kept out ever since and are now talking of selling their assets there – a notion equally rejected because the people insist that Shell cannot sell their liabilities there without first cleaning up their monumental mess.³⁰

The expulsion of Shell from Ogoniland marked the escalation of State repression of the Ogoni people. The instrument for the repression was a newly formed Special Internal Security Task Force headed by Major Paul Okuntimo. In a memo of April 1994, the commander of the taskforce, Major Okuntimo, wrote to the Military Governor of Rivers State, Lt. Col. Dauda Komo, that “Shell operations are still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken.” The military governor responded by recommending “restriction of unauthorized visitors, especially those from Europe to Ogoni”. He also recommended what he termed “wasting operations”³¹ during events organised by MOSOP and other Ogoni groups, in order to justify permanent military presence in the area. He hinted that the oil companies should be pressed into supporting the military operations in Ogoniland.³²

The phases of resistance

Attempting to understand the phases of development of resistance in the Niger Delta can be quite complicated. In his paper, Political economy of resistance in the Niger Delta, Lemmy Owugah³³ delineates four phases of resistance in the region. He posits that the first response of the oppressed to the oppressor is usually nonviolent, but that violence does come eventually as a last resort. He cites Oilwatch, the international oil-resistance network, as promoting nonviolent resistance while recognizing that the patience of the people cannot be expected to be perpetually elastic.

Owugah's four phases of resistance in the Niger Delta are presented as follows:

First phase: Late 1970-mid 1980s

During this phase the people had confidence in the state and its instruments – especially the judiciary – and focused on nonviolent methods of demanding justice through petitions as a key tool for expressing discontent and demanding justice. However, the experience was largely been one of gross disappointment for aggrieved communities, as oil companies blatantly ignored favourable court judgements and in some cases used legal technicalities to constantly delay legal proceedings. Amenities demanded by communities or promised by oil companies were not delivered.

This litigation track continues to this day. For example, despite a 2005 judgement (Jonah Gbemre vs Shell Development Production Company), flaring at Iwherekhan community in Delta State, Nigeria, continues unabated. Shell has also failed to comply with a court order to pay 14 billion Nigerian naira (\$85 million) compensation to Ebubu-Ejamah Community for the historic oil spill in that community.³⁴

In 2008, four farmers and fishermen from the Niger Delta sued Shell at The Hague over oil spills that occurred in their communities in 2004,³⁵ 2006³⁶ and 2008.³⁷ When the judgment was delivered in January 2013, the court absolved Shell of wrongdoing in three of the incidents but found the company guilty in for an oil spill that occurred at Ikot Ada Udo.

Second phase: Mid 1980s-mid 1990s

In this phase the people relied on peaceful demonstrations as a more action-oriented strategy to press their demands. They also began to occupy oil-flow stations. The demands remained simple ones: adequate compensation and provision of basic amenities. However, yet again they were disappointed, as Owugah recounts, as the oil companies were “confident of support from the Nigerian state [which] responded by calling on the military, police and state security operatives, which the state had put at their disposal. These interventions often took the form of burning down of villages, looting, raping, killings, etc.”³⁸

It was at this phase that the government set up the Special Internal Security Task Force to pacify the Ogoni people. The commander of that Task Force boasted at that time that he knew hundreds of ways of killing people and that he had only applied a few of those in Ogoniland.

Similar actions were taken in August 2002, when an amalgam of women from Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ilaje communities in the Delta and Ondo States, desperate and tired of the pollution their communities suffered, embarked on the peaceful occupation of oil platforms and rigs belonging to Chevron and in some cases bared their breasts at the gates of oil company offices or facilities as a means of placing curses on the polluting companies.

In the words of Mrs Felicia Itsero, 67, a protester during the August 2002 blockade:

“Chevron has neglected us; they’ve neglected us for a long time. No good drinking water, they intimidate us with soldiers, police, and navy and tell us that cases of spills are caused by us. We’ve protested against the pollution of our rivers and creeks, destruction of our forest and mangroves and the gas flaring and the noise from it. We’ve complained and protested. All our complaints and protest fell on Chevron’s deaf ears.”³⁹

Third phase: Mid 1990s-1998

In this phase, many people had lost too much faith that the government and the oil companies would respond positively to peaceful protest. So new groups embarked on forceful occupation of oil facilities and sometimes caused some damage. Peaceful direct actions continued alongside more forceful engagements. One such action was the peaceful occupation of Chevron's Parabe offshore platform by Ilaje youths in May 1998. That occupation ended with Chevron conveying Nigerian troops in their helicopters to the platform, who shot two youths dead and arrested many others.⁴⁰

Another game-changing action of 1998 was when Ijaw youths embarked on a dance protest or Ogele, which they also termed Operation Climate Change⁴¹ – occupying some oil-flow stations and shutting down the gas flares. The response by the military left a number of persons dead, raped or missing.

Fourth phase: From December 11, 1998

This phase followed on the heels of the last one. This phase saw the emergence of broader political demands to the Nigerian state. It started off with the Ijaw youths meeting at Kaiama, the hometown of the late Isaac Adaka Boro, to demand a control of natural resources in their territory as well as self-determination within the Nigerian state. The youths also gave oil companies up to 30 December 1999 to vacate the Niger Delta. The response by the military was horrendous. There were massacres in Kaiama and in Yenagoa, the capital city of Bayelsa State. The Kaiama Declaration, just as the Ogoni Bill of Rights and others, was issued as a tool to elicit dialogue. It was not a manifesto for violence or a call to arms. It provided the intellectual basis for real conversations on their grievances. Yet neither the Nigerian state or the oil companies were ready for such conversations.

Looking back at the Kaiama Declaration and its aftermath, a key leader of the Ijaw Youth Congress, Felix Tuodolo, explains, "When we met as Ijaw Youths in Kaiama in 1998, we felt that the Kaiama Declaration embodied the aspirations of the Ijaw people, the actual happenings there and what we want. Secondly, despite the fact that we raised all those issues in the Kaiama Declaration, we also gave room for dialogue. We want dialogue. People have been associating us with violence but if you look at the tenets of the Kaiama Declaration, we are actually asking for dialogue and negotiation with the system,"⁴² The issues they demanded dialogue on included environmental degradation, poverty, marginalisation and destruction of livelihoods.

In November 1999, there was an all-out military assault on Odi during which houses were bombed and 2,483 Nigerians were massacred.⁴³ Graffiti left on the ruins by the invading soldiers gave some indication as to why the attack was so vicious. One of the writings read, "We were sent by government to kill and burn your community, take heart." Another said, "We go kill all Ijaw people with our gun."⁴⁴

Oil and profits before people appears to be the doctrine of both the government and the oil companies. Prior to the Odi genocide in November 1999, Nigeria's Defence Minister, General Theophilus Danjuma, addressed the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Ministerial conference on 25 November 1999, saying that assault, 'code-named' Operation Hakuri II, "was initiated with the mandate of protecting lives and properties – particularly oil platforms flow stations, operating rig terminals and pipelines, refineries and power installations in the Niger Delta".⁴⁵

After years of betrayal of the hopes and aspirations of the Niger Delta people, with the relentless assault on their environment through continuous oil spills and gas flaring, with rising unemployment and the palpable lack of socio-economic infrastructure, it is easy to see why the phases of nonviolent agitation turned violent by the mid 2000s.

Military, oil companies and militancy

The question may be asked, how much communication occurs when one person speaks French to another person who understands only Swahili? The short answer is 'none'. The failure of the state and oil companies to pay attention to the demands of the people but rather to depend on brute force inexorably led to a violent confrontation with the oppressed and the voiceless.

In a Peace and Security Strategy in the Niger Delta report⁴⁶ prepared for Shell in 2003, the authors acknowledged that the annual casualties from fighting already taking place in the Niger Delta was of the 'high intensity conflict' category with over 1,000 fatalities. They saw the violent trend as capable of disrupting oil operations and also threatening the security of the state.

Interestingly, despite oil companies' constant attempts to blame oil spills on violent saboteurs and criminals, the report linked oil theft to the activities of politicians. It noted,

Indeed, given the likely illegal oil bunkering links to political campaigns, the run-up to the 2007 Presidential elections may see a significantly earlier serious escalation of the Niger Delta conflicts which will be difficult to dismantle, or even to return to the former pre-election lower level on conflict.

The report goes on to suggest that between 8 to 10 per cent of oil production is lost to thieves. Most importantly, the report states categorically, "SCIN (Shell) cannot ignore Niger Delta conflicts or its role in exacerbating these."⁴⁷

The rise of militant resistance to oil operations in the Niger Delta is also a rejection of the military occupation of the region. The occupation is linked directly to the protection of oil facilities to ensure unfettered extraction of the resource that generates 95 per cent of

Nigeria's export earnings and more than 80 per cent of government revenue. An average of "about 85 per cent of the security vote [budget] of the Niger Delta States has been devoted to funding a Joint Military Task Force (JTF)".⁴⁸ This has not brought security to the region but has rather built a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity.

As we have seen, the arrival of armed resistance to military and oil company impunity did not happen overnight. It emerged after a series of disappointments and intensified environmental degradation of the oil region. The brutal repression in Ogoniland, the massacres that followed the adoption of the Kaiama Declaration in 1998 and the destruction of Odi in 1999 all made the vigorous resistance seen since 2004 much more likely. That year saw the announcement by a militant leader, Asari Dokubo, of Operation Locust Feast – an all-out attack on the Nigerian State. In the following years a number of militant groups arose and some came together in 2005 under the name Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), led by the legendary Jomo Gbomo. The MEND leader has remained the stuff of legend, as he has not presented a public face.⁴⁹

The militants have pursued both a political agenda through sabotage of oil facilities and a more or less economic one, mostly through hostage taking. What began as isolated incidents grew in sophistication to a point where MEND claimed responsibility for an attack on Shell's Bonga offshore platform in June 2008. The military response to militancy saw the destruction of whole communities such as Gbaramatu in Delta State in May 2009, and an attack on Ayakoromo in December 2010, where at least 20 persons were killed.

The number of coordinated and sustained violent attacks on oil facilities and its personnel stood at about 40 incidents in 2006. It rose to 80 and 90 incidents in 2007 and 2008. Violent incidents, including hostage taking, kidnapping and abduction of both expatriate and local staff of the oil industry, reached 62 in 2006 and 172 in 2007.

The impact of these militant activities resulted in rapidly dwindling oil revenues and forced the Federal Government of Nigeria to make an offer of amnesty to the combatants in October 2009. In response, over 20,000 of them handed in their weapons in a programme of disarmament, demobilisation, reorientation and reintegration (DDRR). While it appeared that an amnesty based on pecuniary rewards would at best be tenuous, this has managed to secure some level of peace in the oil fields.

The amnesty programme succeeded in getting oil companies to restore production levels to what they were before the rise of militancy in the region. However, the lands and creeks of the Niger Delta are still highly militarised, giving the impression that either the peace is not deep seated or that the tradition of oil companies' working behind a military shield has simply come to stay. In sum, extraction levels may have risen, but this is still assured by military might. The oil companies and their facilities (including gas

flare furnaces) continue to have special protection from security forces, protection not offered to citizens. The oil fields are still operated as if they were war zones.

Climate change, receding resources and coming conflicts

The lessons from Nigeria's experience are particularly relevant, given the growing evidence of climate-change impacts and likely increase in intensity of conflicts as resources get depleted.

Climate change is a clear security issue in some ways. First, nations have to secure the lives of their citizens as the challenge of smaller habitable spaces, food-production failures and increased temperatures becomes more pronounced.

Secondly, a shrinking resource base, including of petroleum products – the significant contributor to global warming – will lead to more transnational military adventures as well as an intensified search for more inefficient and dirtier energy resources. Nigeria is already set to move into bitumen extraction that would involve open-cast mining and the displacement of communities. The growth of local energy resourcing through fracking in the US is also causing Nigeria worries that the country may lose a significant crude oil buyer and that the price of crude oil may plummet in the future. The paradoxical response to this has been some talks of Nigeria considering fracking as an option.

Violent environmental conflicts will most likely lead to greater militarisation of territories and resource sites with scant respect for currently accepted norms, including a respect for protected territories. Overall, climate change challenges the fundamentals of our right to life as well as that of other species.

Harold Welzer highlights the fact that “[T]he role of energy in future scenarios of violence is the reverse side of the carbon emission problem. In a bizarre equation, the limitless energy hunger of the industrial countries, both old and new, sharpens the struggle for the resources whose depletion endangers the survival of humanity.”⁵⁰

Moreover, the 2007 report of the IPCC has shown that Africa will be hit harder by climate change for two reasons: First because its poverty levels, deficient infrastructure, political instability and, in some areas, endemic violence make it more vulnerable to climatic impacts. And second, because for every one degree Celsius global temperature increase, Africa suffers 50 per cent more, making the region particularly vulnerable to global-warming impacts. It is predicted that by 2020, about 75 to 250 million Africans will lack access to potable water.⁵¹ Lakes are fast losing their water in Africa and elsewhere. Most noteworthy is the dramatic decrease in water in Lake Chad, where up to 90 per cent of its original area is already lost.⁵²

With regard to food production, there could be up to a 50 per cent reduction in normal yields from rain-fed agriculture.⁵³ There could also be worse flooding and droughts. Diseases can be reasonably expected to spread or surface in areas they were not usually seen.

Other better-resourced regions such as Europe and North America will either suffer fewer impacts or have better coping mechanisms. Given that these regions bear the most responsibility for causing climate change – and yet their political leaders refuse to take action – the injustice of climate change becomes obvious and unacceptable.

The coming climate conflicts could be powered not by a drive for territorial expansion but more by an attempt to secure natural resources, including water and fodder for livestock. In such cases, regular or standing armies may not be necessary. Private gangs, militant entrepreneurs and armed groups could become the norm, driven scrambling to gain access to certain economic benefits and leading to a breakdown of central power. Wars could simply become unwinnable. This evolution is likely to end the illusion of powerful states' projecting themselves as the policemen of the world.

Nigeria also provides an important case study in how climate pressures lead to major migrations and to open conflicts. Eleven states in northern Nigeria are experiencing serious impacts of desertification. The rate of desertification is currently put at 0.6 square kilometers per year,⁵⁴ contributing to the shrinking of Lake Chad at the northeast corner of the country to a mere 10 per cent of the size it was in the early 1960s.

The combined effect of desertification and the shrinkage of Lake Chad have resulted in pronounced southward migration of pastoralists. This has resulted in increasing deadly conflicts between the pastoralists and farmers in the middle-belt region of the country. In recent times, the pastoralists, or herdsmen, have carried out attacks with sophisticated weapons such as AK47s rather than their traditional bows, arrows and daggers. These conflicts appear linked to overall terrorist activities in parts of Nigeria and are often conveniently presented as religious conflicts, but their causes are much more complicated and may well have climate-change roots.

In attempts to curb the conflicts, the government of Nigeria is planning to re-establish grazing routes and reserves across the nation. It is hoped that these will reduce the points of conflicts between the nomadic pastoralists and the farmers in other parts of the country. Other contemplated measures include the popularisation of climate-resilient crops, such as sweet sorghum, that could serve as fodder as well as food and for other industrial uses. In this context, local solutions such as agro-ecological practices could restore local livelihoods and reduce areas of friction. Proposals for a recharged Lake Chad – using water from the Ubangi River in Central African Republic (CAR) – could see a return of fishermen to the means of livelihood in the lake, although the financial

costs and security situation in CAR are major obstacles to achieving this. Nevertheless, a reconnection of huge displaced populations to productive activities could help in rebuilding peace in the region.

The key to preventing conflict and building peace will be making the connections between climate change, fossil-fuel production and corruption and violence in Nigeria and building popular movements to oppose this. Civil-society organisations including members of a national network known as the Host Communities Network, for example, are already working to build understanding that the gas flares of the oil fields in the south of Nigeria do contribute to desertification in northern Nigeria by reason of the millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases the gas flares pump into the atmosphere continuously.⁵⁵

Popular movements resisting climate violence

It is clear from climate negotiations under the UNFCCC that real solutions and real actions will not be agreed on by powerful polluters nor by emerging economies who insist on the right to catch up and to gobble up whatever atmospheric space is left for carbon. The situation can look desperate until we look at the growing resistance against the expansion of fossil-fuel extraction and usage. The resistance to Shell and the Nigerian state by the Ogoni people showed what people power can achieve when harnessed effectively. The Ogoni people, under the banner of MOSOP, mobilised using cultural tools such as songs, drama and dance to assert themselves and demand an end to environmental crimes in their territory. Although faced with heavy military reprisals, the Ogoni people halted oil extraction in their territory in 1993, and that situation remains more than two decades after.

Elsewhere, campaigns are also building to demand that fossil fuels stay underground. In Norway, for example, resistance by fishermen and youth groups has blocked oil drilling off the coast of the Lofoten Islands since 2001. That was not a small victory. A young Norwegian activist, Silje Lundberg, in her blog said the victory had involved a long fight, “But I’m certain that for every time we’ve won this, it gets harder and harder for the oil industry to win. And therefore I am certain that when the time comes, we’ll win again. There is no other option.” She added, “We cannot continue to build our country on a industry that produces a product that threatens millions of people all over the world.”

The battles to stop dirty energy and thus combat climate change are being fought by citizens’ movements on all continents. Significant in this are the struggles against the Keystone XL pipeline in both Canada and the USA. The rise of the indigenous peoples’ Idle No More⁵⁶ movement shows both the power of a mobilised people and an awakening of people power to fight real battles for the future of the planet and humanity.

How can the resistance we see around the world work to halt the descent to lawlessness and barbarity that will result from a world remain hooked to climate-altering energy substances? This is the great question that movements must find answers to. Will the world agree that we have had enough of extraction and damage?⁵⁷ Can impending climate-change impacts outrage the world and see leaders and citizens in agreement to fight the scourge?

The world appears unperturbed by the climate scandal, perhaps because polluters have kidnapped our memory and sense of history and our capacity to imagine a future that we want. 'Business as usual' continues to throw up false solutions, while social injustices pile up. As the experience of Nigeria shows, in the unavoidable confrontation with climate change, the dangers of a global power structure driven by corporate interests and backed by a merciless military machinery will become brutally apparent with time. The military-political complex has created and profited from the climate crisis. It is sheer madness for anyone to assume that this configuration can solve the crisis.

The way forward is not the way of retreat. The times are critical for popular mobilisations on all available fronts, linking between formations across the world, joining up social forces and active engagement in community and national political processes that push for real solutions to climate change. While the struggles must concretely be rooted in local organising, they must be entrenched in global solidarity actions, resisting all forms of fossil-fuel extractivist activities.⁵⁸ The tight marriage of political structures with polluting corporations and the continued entrenchment of neoliberal economic policy make the needed transition more difficult to bring about but offers no excuse for inaction.

In a globalised world facing a planetary emergency such as climate change is, global action by citizens organised in social formations is the way forward. Individual actions are good, but it is collective action that will bring the necessary change.

*“This we tell you
They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will RISE
We may die but stay alive
Placed on the slab
Slaughtered by the day
We are the living
Long sacrificed
We thought it was oil
But it was blood
We thought it was oil
But this was blood”*

– Nnimmo Bassey

Notes

- 1 Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas (2001). Where Vultures Feast – 40 Years of Shell in the Niger Delta. ERA, Benin City, P13
- 2 Essential Action. Expose the Shell Game. <http://www.essentialaction.org/shell/rapsheet.html>
- 3 See a video documentary *The Naked Option* by Candace Schermerhorn (2001) at <http://www.nakedoptionmovie.com>
- 4 Peter P. Ekeh, The Contents And Character Of British Colonial Treaties Of 1884 And 1894 With The Itsekiri Of Nigeria's Western Niger Delta. <http://waado.org/urhobohistory/NigerDelta/ColonialTreaties/ItsekiriTreaties/EditorsIntroduction.html>
- 5 Tatabonko Orok Edem. George Taubman Goldie – the founder of Nigeria. <http://www.gamji.com/article4000/NEWS4956.htm> (sourced on 2 October 2013).
- 6 Ike Okonta. When Citizens Revolt (2008) Ofirima Publishing House Ltd. Page 10
- 7 The first military coup occurred in January 1966.
- 8 Tom Mbele-Ekanem (2000) *Beyond The Execution – Understanding The Ethnic and Military Politics in Nigeria*. Riverside, Inland Publication Company. Page 16
- 9 See a chart on this in Paul Francis et al. (2011) *Securing Development And Peace in the Niger Delta – A Social and Conflict Analysis for Change*. www.wilsoncenter.org/publication-series/recent-publications-the-project-leadership-and-building-state-capacity page 71
- 10 Daily Trust, 20 August 2013. The Rising Rate of Poverty in Nigeria, <http://dailytrust.info/index.php/editorial/3532-the-rising-rate-of-poverty-in-nigeria>
- 11 Stakeholder Democracy Network, The Niger Delta, <http://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org/context.html>
- 12 Platform. Oil & Poverty in the Niger Delta. <http://www.carbonweb.org/showitem.asp?article=72&parent=7&link=Y&gp=3>
- 13 See an example at National Bureau of Statistics. Bayelsa State, Information <http://nigerianstat.gov.ng/information/details/Bayelsa>
- 14 East-West Road Pivotal to national development – NDDC. 24 March 2014. <http://www.yohaig.com/nigeria-news/national-mirror/east-west-road-pivotal-to-nations-development-nddc/>
- 15 Nnimmo Bassey (2012) *To Cook A Continent – Destructive Extraction and the Climate Crisis in Africa*. Oxford: Pambazuka Press
- 16 The Joint Inspection Team is usually made up of representatives of the oil company, State and Federal Agencies/Ministries of Environment and of the communities. The report of the visit must jointly be jointly signed by all members of the JIV for such a report to be valid.
- 17 See for example, Stakeholder Democracy Network. 2013. Communities Not Criminals – Illegal Oil Refineries in the Niger Delta., Port Harcourt, Nigeria,
- 18 Kenneth Rodman, Nonstate Actors and Human Rights Sanctions: A Challenge to the State Centric Model?, 12 Ethics and International Affairs” 19, supra note 506 at 35
- 19 Patrick Naagbanton. Conflicts Resolution and Peace Building in the Niger Delta: The Role of Government Institutions and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). http://www.cehrd.org/files/Conflicts_Resolution_and_Peace_Building_in_

- the _Niger_Delta-1.doc. There is also an account of the incident in Human Rights Watch's report at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/nigeria/Nigew991-08.htm>
- 20 Human Rights Watch. Protest and Repression in the Niger Delta. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/nigeria/Nigew991-08.htm>
 - 21 ND-HERO. 5 December 2000. Alternative Solutions to the use of Military Personnel in Guarding Oil Facilities – Acceptable Security Policy for the Nigerian Agip Oil Company
 - 22 See for example, The Flames of Shell: Oil, Nigeria and the Ogoni at <http://berkeleycitizen.org/boycott/boycott2.htm>
 - 23 See Shell Declares 'force majeure' on Nigeria crude exports at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/03/shell-declares-force-majeure-nigeria-crude-exports/>
 - 24 For more on this see Douglas A. Yates (2012) *The Scramble for African Oil – Oppression, Corruption and War for Control of Africa's Natural Resources*, New York, Pluto Press
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 - 27 Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed along with Barinem Kiobel, Saturday Dobee, Paul Levura, Nordu Eawo, Felix Nuata, Daniel Gbokoo, John Kpuinen and Baribor Bera.
 - 28 Tom Mbeke-Ekanem (2000) Page 93
 - 29 Nnimmo Bassey. 01 August 2013. Two Years After the UNEP Report – Ogoni Still Groans. <http://nnimmo.blogspot.com/2013/08/two-years-after-unep-report-ogoni-still.html>
 - 30 One of the reasons why the Ogoni struggle has been uniquely successful was the organic and inclusive nature of their mass mobilisation strategy. Although MOSOP was the arrowhead for the movement, there were a number of subgroups that kept the base active and strong. These included women groups, youth and students groups as well as churches.
 - 31 Wasting operations as used by the military task force referred to indiscriminate killing of local peoples as a means of terrifying them into silence.
 - 32 Tom Mbeke-Ekanem (2000), Page 112
 - 33 Environmental Rights Action (ERA).2000. The Emperor Has No Clothes. ERA, Benin City
 - 34 UNPO. 27 July 2010. Ogoni: The People of Ejama Ebubu compensated for Oil Spill after 40 years. <http://www.unpo.org/article/11398>
 - 35 Goi community in Ogoni, Rivers State. Goi community was sacked by this incident and remains a desolate land with community people forced to relocate to other communities
 - 36 Oruma community in Bayelsa State. There were two claims in this community
 - 37 Ikot Ada udo in Akwa Ibom State. The spill here occurred when a capped oil well failed and sprung a leak that lasted over a period of several weeks
 - 38 Owugah. In Environmental Rights Action (ERA).2000. The Emperor Has No Clothes. ERA, Benin City. Page 115
 - 39 Interview with women protesters at Abiteye flowstation, Escravos, Delta State. Thursday 15 August, 2002.

- 40 <http://www.earthrights.org/legal/what-happened-parabe>
- 41 It was in response to this incident that I wrote my poem *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* in 1998.
- 42 Ibiba DonPedro (2006). *Oil in the Water – Crude Power and Militancy in the Niger Delta*. Foreword Communications Limited, Lagos. Page 106
- 43 See Environmental Rights Action. 2000. A Blanket of Silence – Images of the Odi Genocide. <http://www.eraction.org/publications/silence.pdf> . Page 7
- 44 Nigerian English for “we will kill all Ijaw people with our guns.” Page 13
- 45 *The Guardian*. November 26, 1999. Lagos, Nigeria. cited in Ijaw Council for Human Rights’ Report – Amnesty: Niger Delta and the Politics of the Barrel. 2011.
- 46 Peace and Security in the Niger Delta – Conflict Expert Group Baseline Report, Working Paper for SPDC by WAC Global Services. December 2003.
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- 48 Sofiri Joab-Peterside et al ed. 2011. Perceptions & Reality: Documenting the Amnesty Process in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. CASS, Port Harcourt. Page 2
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- 51 Natural Resource Defense Council. November 2007. Safe Water in Peril: Addressing the Effects of Global Warming on Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation. <http://www.nrdc.org/international/water/peril.pdf>
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- 53 Federal Ministry of Agriculture. 2013. National Policy on Climate Change. Page 28
- 54 *The Vanguard* (Lagos). 03 May 2010. Special Report on Desertification in Nigeria: The sun eats our land. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2010/05/special-report-on-desertification-in-nigeria-the-sun-eats-our-land/>
- 55 Gas flaring has been outlawed in Nigerian since the Associated Gas Reinjection Act of 1979 came into effect in 1984. That act required that before oil companies could be permitted to flare associated gas, they had to present a plan showing when and how they intended to stop the flaring. Upon getting the permit they would also be required to pay a fine as a penalty for indulging in the cat of gas flaring.
- 56 <http://www.idlenomore.ca/>
- 57 See an expose on the challenges of extraction and the impacts on the planet in Gaia Foundation’s publication, Phillipe Sibaud, (London, 2012) *Opening Pandora’s Box – The New Wave of Land Grabbing by the Extractive Industries and the Devastating Impact on Earth*
- 58 Firoze Manji argued that the actions of the extractive industry are comparable to those of dentists extracting teeth. He believes that these companies are actually engaged in amputation and should thus be so characterized. See article at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/08/extractive-industries-afri-ca-201481083038209883.html>

This chapter is part of the book, *The Secure and the Dispossessed – How the Military and Corporations are Shaping a Climate-changed World* (TNI/Pluto Press, November 2015). The book exposes the dangers of a new climate security agenda in which the powerful respond to the climate crisis with military and corporate solutions. But it also shares the stories and practices of communities worldwide building the inspiring alternatives that promise a just transition to a climate-changed world.

'If you want to understand why we can't leave it to the Pentagon and corporations to shape our response to climate change, then you need to read this book.'

– Naomi Klein, author of *This Changes Everything* and *The Shock Doctrine*

'Will we respond to the climate crisis with the politics of fear and business as usual – and in so doing condemn millions? Or will we wrest power from the corporations and the military in order to develop the radical just solutions we need?'

– Pablo Solon, Former Ambassador to Bolivia and lead climate negotiator to the UN

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