

A review by Sonia Rothwell

of 'Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta' ed Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad (Zed Books)

At the beginning of May 2011, Nigeria's Federal Court of Appeal upheld a ruling that the oil company Shell does not own the land where it runs the country's largest oil export terminal. The multinational corporation maintained it had bought the site, at the Bonny terminal in Bayelsa state, outright but three years ago a lower court said Shell must pay rent for the land to the local community. Shell says it will make a further appeal to the Nigerian Supreme Court.

The terminal is in the Niger Delta region, now almost as synonymous with militancy and violence as it is with being the treasure chest containing Nigeria's black gold. From news stories it would appear that armed anti-corporate insurgents teem from its backwaters as sure as high quality sweet crude teems from its oil wells. But as this absorbing and comprehensive book of essays explains, the insurgency permeating the Niger Delta is most definitely not just about oil.

As the book sets out, there are several key issues here which contribute to the insurgency: the marginalisation of the people of the Niger Delta states and their desire to be responsible for mineral wealth on their territory, the relatively poor compensation communities receive from state-backed oil companies benefitting from these riches, the lack of opportunities for young people in the region. It is about a colonial hangover, it is about the power, both domestic and international, that can be won by control of this globally vital asset. The list goes on. Nigeria's government has struggled to deal with increasingly violent attacks against oil company workers and installations in the states which make up the Niger Delta region. Its symbiotic relationship with oil corporations whose activities are the source of current conflict puts it in a difficult position if it wants to demonstrate to militants that it will act on their concerns.

In the past its reactions have provoked international outrage and led to its suspension from the Commonwealth. In 1995 the writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight co-accused were hanged by the Nigerian state. Saro-Wiwa's pacifist anti-state and anti-oil company organisation, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP,) had been drawing international attention to the issue of resource control and disempowerment of local people. Saro-Wiwa and other environmental campaigners were charged with murdering four rival leaders at a rally. The executions were seen as a hasty act to stop their campaign against Shell and the Nigerian government which called for an increased share of oil revenues and compensation for environmental damage to land belonging to the Ogoni people.

But currently, violence is the preferred means of getting otherwise silent voices heard. Taking foreign oil-workers hostage is a favourite tactic of groups of invariably young men who in the past would almost certainly have been making a political point against the multinational oil companies. Now, they may simply be engaging in criminal activity without a political aim. The difference between militants and plain criminals can be so slight it would take a political scientist to determine. Some organisations like perhaps the most famous group, MEND (the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta), are clearly focused on political goals. MEND wants to

fight the oppression of the people of the Delta by the Nigerian government and its partners in the petroleum industry.

A network or 'brand' rather than a traditional militant organisation, MEND's structure makes it more difficult to smash militarily and it can 'sub-contract' attacks on oil installations and infrastructure to other insurgent groups. Its methods have succeeded in shutting down a third of Nigeria's oil production leading to a spike in the world price of oil and its savvy use of the media means that like Saro-Wiwa's MOSOP, MEND has been able to remind the world of the crisis in the Niger Delta. However to do this it has killed, injured or kidnapped dozens of Nigerians and foreigners. After a brief truce beginning in October 2009, MEND announced the resumption of unfettered violence against the oil industry in January of the following year.

As the book explains, the addition of oil wealth to the picture is merely exacerbating resentment over existing issues in the region. The Niger Delta's historical struggles for self-determination have become focused on control and management of its resources. The feeling that it has been neglected by the Abuja administration and that its wealth has been unequally distributed across Nigeria has led to deep-seated resentment in the region. This is being expressed by a whole slew of groups in the form of violent disruption.

An amnesty programme which persuaded many militants to hand in their weapons in return for a presidential pardon and re-training ran into trouble. There was criticism of the poor quality of the training as well as concerns that although militias were disarming, the government-funded armed joint task force (JTF), which had conducted a violent campaign to crush the insurgency, remained in place. It also failed to address the underlying issues of distrust and calling to account of those who had committed abuses. What also emerged was that only a small fraction of the money which the government had set aside for the amnesty programme would actually go to the former militants. Eventually, after delays to payments and other problems, some of them gradually returned to their old ways.

The importance of oil to Nigeria's regional and global diplomatic power and thus the importance of bringing peace to the Niger Delta cannot be overstated. After reading this book, it is hard not to wonder what will bring peace to a region within a country where democracy is fragile. Threats and attacks from religious groups such as Boko Haram are adding to the force which is ripping apart the fabric of Nigeria. The election of Niger Delta indigene, President Goodluck Jonathan could be a positive step for peace here but as the book's editors point out, a consensus-based solution including genuine local and national democratic engagement is needed. Equitable distribution of oil revenues is a starting point but addressing issues of citizenship and responsibility as well as regaining trust between state and people must also play a part.

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