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PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

GST 201

200 LEVEL

LAW

ASSIGNMENT

Write an essay on violent conflict on the geopolitical zone you’re from.

THE BATTLE FOR WARRI

Control of the city of Warri, the largest metropolitan area in Delta state and therefore a prime source of political patronage, has been an especially fiercely contested area. Since before Nigeria attained independence in 1960, there has been tension surrounding the region as to who the true “owners” of the town is. Warri, the second most important oil town in Nigeria, is claimed as the homeland of three different ethnic groups; the Itsekiri, the Urhobo and the Ijaw. As a result of this tension, the arrangement of government in the region was a difficult task for the federal government.

The Itsekiri, a small ethnic group of a few hundred thousand people, were the first to make contact with the European traders. They sought for western education and used the knowledge acquired to their own commercial advantages. Up till 1879, the Itsekiri chieftains monopolized trade with the Europeans in the region. Through the wealth they acquired, they enjoyed an advantaged position to the Ijaws and the Urhobos in the region. They resided in villages spread out along the Benin and Escravos Rivers into the mangrove forest riverine areas towards the Atlantic Ocean. With a population of approximately eight million people, the Ijaw are reportedly Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic group. However, they are scattered in six  states, which makes them minorities in these states. The relocation of the municipality to Warri allegedly angered the Ijaws who interpreted this as "further evidence of their marginalization." They resided in the western swampy riverine areas of the region. The Urhobo, an ethnic group larger than the Itsekiri but smaller than the Ijaw also lived in Warri and to the north on land.

Delta state was created during the military regime of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida in 1991. The Ijaw and Urhobo saw the current situation in the state in which the Itsekiri dominates the formal structures of government both at the local government level and the state level as discriminatory. At the time there were only three local government areas in the region; Warri North, Warri South and Warri south west and they were all under the rule of the Itsekiri. The Ijaw and Urhobo demanded for new wards and local government areas to be created which they believe would help their ethnic group be more represented.

 In March 1997 2003, a major outbreak of violence ensued and centered on the creation by the then military regime of a new local government area; Warri South West and the location of its headquarters. In an egregious display of abuse of power and in direct contravention and violation of the Federal Government of Nigeria Decree #36 of 1996 and Decree #7 of 1997, Col. J.D. Dungs, the erstwhile Military Administrator of Delta State, falsely announced the creation of a Warri South West local government area with headquarters in Ogbe-Ijaw. A requisite authoritative instrument of creation of Warri South West local government never backed this announcement. Instead the Warri South West local government area was created with its headquarters in Ogidigben, an Itsekiri area. According to the Ijaws, the Itsekiris orchestrated the move and they deemed them their enemies who should be exterminated.

From March to May, widespread clashes between the two tribes continued in which hundreds of people died on each side. An AFP report claims that Nigerian troops were deployed to Warri after five people including a policeman were shot dead and several others wounded in the inter-ethnic fighting.

A statement issued by the Warri Council of Chiefs claimed that "about 3,000 Itsekiris have either been wounded or maimed since the hostilities began while at least 100 Itsekiri boats have been burnt or seized as a result of the blockade between Warri-Escarvos and Warri-Benin River"(*Post Express Wired* 2 May 1997). People arrested for their alleged involvement in the conflict were all "screened and released except those who possessed arms illegally"

In October 1997, security forces reportedly attacked an Ijaw village killing one person and arresting 58 others in retaliation for the disappearance of four soldiers who had "disappeared on patrol in mysterious circumstances" (CNN 2 Oct. 1997). The soldiers were allegedly part of a task force sent to restore order in the Delta region.

In November 1998 the Concerned Itsekiri Women led by Dr. Joyce Ugochukwu, Mrs. Uwala Murphy-Akpieyi and Mrs. Esima Kpogho, "on behalf" of Itsekiri people appealed to the Federal Government to "help stop the genocide" against Itsekiri, and to remove the State Administrator Walter Feghabo, an Ijaw, for taking sides in the conflict (*Post Express Wired* 13 Nov. 1998).

At a peace meeting between youths and leaders of the Ijaw and the Itsekiri at Effon near Warri, the warring parties agreed to end hostilities. This violent conflict is now referred to as the “Warri Crisis.”

REFERENCES

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/nigeria1103.pdf>

<https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ad6864.html>