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COURSE: GST 201 (PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES)

COLLEGE/DEPT: LAW

ASSIGNMENT: Write an essay on violent conflict on the geo-political zone you’re from in not less than 2 pages.

 ANSWER

 Armed violence in the South-South region is dominated by conflict in the oil-producing Niger Delta (Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States). In 2005, it was estimated that over 100 different militia groups were active in Rivers State alone. Armed violence in the region has experienced peaks and troughs over the past decade. An amnesty introduced in October 2009 has had some success in quelling militants, but groups concerned have remained vocal about their potential return to armed violence and are – according to some reports – regrouping their ranks.

The amnesty deal itself has been polarizing. Critics have condemned the fact that the amnesty did little to change the region’s governance structures, and argue that state officials, governors and other elites benefit the most from oil revenues. Other analysts argue that these criticisms do not acknowledge the tangible dividends of the amnesty program, reflected in reduced armed violence and kidnappings. In addition to the Delta insurgency, land disputes are common in the South-South region and in recent years, disagreements over land use have turned violent. Furthermore, high levels of violent criminality have been reported in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State.

The Niger Delta had one of the highest per capita level of violence between the beginning of 2012 and June 2013. The high proportion of the population who are youths and the level of underemployment are partially responsible for this state of affairs. Political figures give weapons to youths to engage in political violence, and those weapons are not collected when election season ends, leading to their use in other forms of violence as well.

Generally, unemployment and misplaced priorities amongst youths, power struggles, poverty, competition for resources, the poor state and mismanagement of the national economy, desire to attain wealth and power rapidly by any means necessary and ethnic and cultural differences are major causes of crime in the Niger Delta. Official statistics show a variety of types of crimes occurring in the region, including kidnapping, murder and armed robbery, the killing of police officers and political assassinations.

 Elections have been a particular flashpoint of political violence. With a number of people killed in the build-up, many in the region were fearful of a possible outbreak of violence during and after elections. As a result, the Nigerian Federal Government deployed thousands of military personnel in the region to assist local police forces in containing the possible damage of electoral violence. Various types of political violence occur frequently in the region. One of the most common is armed robbery, though kidnapping and organized crime are also regular occurrences.

There are many other types of violence occurring in the Niger Delta. Cultism and inter-cult rivalry clashes are a regular occurrence in the state. Such cults have become a threat to the peace within the tertiary institutions in the country and the region in particular. Political parties have used unemployed youth to intimidate their rivals and have used violent rhetoric to galvanize their supporters, resulting in violent clashes around election season. In the Niger Delta, there have been clashes over control of the crude oil resources between youths, militant groups and the Joint Military Task Force (JTF).

The perpetrators of armed violence are largely youth groups who represent a disproportionate share of the region’s population, and are responsible for a disproportionate share of its violence. But they are not the only ones responsible for violence. Members of the Militant groups and cults groups have also engaged in violence rivalry for their own purposes. Politicians, businessmen, oil company workers, community leaders and groups, and union leaders have all contributed to armed violence by employing unemployed youths to engage in violence on their behalf. Some corrupt security agents who aid and rent their weapons to criminals for use in crimes (indeed, some of them are members of these criminal groups), and some ex-servicemen keep or do not surrender their weapons when they are discharged so as to use them for their own violent purposes later.

Members of the oil producing communities, the general public, women, children, physically challenged persons, the aged, members of the various cult groups, members of unions and, in general, male youth have all been victimized.

The violence between armed groups in the Niger Delta was primarily the result of a struggle between the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV) for control over illegal oil revenues. Underlying issues have fuelled the violence: unequal distribution of resources; lack of social services; crushing poverty and youth unemployment; political marginalization; the impact of oil money on community politics; the manipulation of frustrated youths by political elites and traditional rulers; and organized crime syndicates involved in oil theft.

Added to this is the widespread availability of small arms and other lethal weapons. This has resulted in armed violence ranging from communal clashes with the formation of ethnic militias to battles for supremacy between armed youth and criminal groups, all the way to violence between armed cult groups and government security forces.

The Nigeria Police Force is the primary lawfully constituted force for maintaining order in the Niger Delta. However, they are supported by other state agencies. Primary amongst these is the State Security Service (S.S.S.), which works with informants from most of the communities and members of the general public to arrest prospective perpetrators of armed violence. The military – particularly those with the JTF – is also involved in managing armed violence. The Nigeria Civil Defense Corps provides community policing and alternative security services.

The government has undertaken various strategies to control armed violence. It formed the JTF to combat militancy in the Niger Delta. In parallel, it set up an amnesty program that was intended by the Federal Government to rehabilitate and reintegrate Niger Delta youths and to recover their weapons and ammunition. On a more local level, neighborhood watch and community groups have been set up, along with skills-training centers for formerly militant youth. Outside the government, civil society organizations have been doing a large degree of work with government on issues around law and for the care of victims of armed violence. Both community-based and faith-based organizations do work in this regard.

There are significant challenges to understanding and reducing armed violence in the Niger Delta. Many incidents of armed violence are not recorded or reported, making it difficult to form an accurate impression of the level of armed violence in the region. The government uses repressive tactics to manage armed violence, and has not been particularly willing to respond to enquiries about its approach or strategy. This, along with a dearth of information in publicly accessible sources, means that our understanding of the perpetrators and dynamics of violence in the region is severely limited.

The lack of both information and willingness of those in the government to engage with NGOs and the press on armed violence in Edo, coupled with its heavy-handed tactics, makes the suppression of armed violence more difficult. The government and its security agents in the state have been doing their best to curtail armed violence in the state, but much still needs to be done both in terms of armed violence reduction and awareness creation to help stimulate economic conditions conducive to peace.