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Economics, politics and armed violence are often closely interlinked in the region. With political elites buffered by proceeds from oil revenue, governance in the region is weak and often unaccountable, subsequently making limited progress addressing underlying drivers of conflict in the region.270

The large urban centre of Port Harcourt, capital of River State, witnesses high levels of political protesting and demonstrating, some of which have turned violent. Port Harcourt was a regional flashpoint for political violence during the 2003 and 2007 elections,271 and continues to serve as a hotspot of violent clashes between rival political supporters.272 All states in the South South region were won by current President Goodluck Jonathan in the most recent 2011 general elections.273 There was also ongoing violence in the state gubernatorial elections as heated debates during campaigning spilled over into bloodshed.

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.282 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 at the time of writing.

The amnesty deal itself has been polarising. 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.284 Other analysts argue that these criticisms do not acknowledge the tangible dividends of the amnesty programme, reflected in reduced armed violence and kidnappings.285 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.286 Furthermore, high levels of violent criminality have been reported in Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State.

Delta State emerged from the former Bendel State in 1991 following agitation for the creation of separate state by the Urhobos and Anioma regions.302 It is an oil-producing state in the Niger Delta/South region with a population of 4,098,291.303 The state capital is Asaba. The state has a wide coastal belt, which is interlaced with rivers and streams that form part of the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta, (broadly defined to include nine southern states, of which Delta State is one) is home to approximately 140 ethnic groups. This diversity, com- bined with overlapping socioeconomic conditions, has been prominent in violent competition and disputes over resources, land, economic and political power.304

Within Delta State, the ethnic Aniocha, Ika, Ukwuani and Oshimili dominate the north, the Urhobo the centre, and in the south the Isoko, Ijaw, Itsekiri and a few Urhobos. These groups are known to inter-marry. Christianity and traditional faiths are practised.

Various mineral deposits are present, which include crude oil, clay, silica, kaolin, tar sand, gemstones and limestone.

#### Overview of armed violence in the state

Historic legacyDelta State has a long history of violence, which predates the discovery of oil in the region in 1957.305 According to a 2012 CLEEN Foundation survey, approximately 12% of respondents (the highest regional rate across the country) in the South region had been victims of armed violence.306 Delta State is well above the regional average in terms of incidents of violence per capita, though it has improved slightly (notwithstanding an increase in violence in the first half of 2013).

Levels of violenceBetween 1997 and 2003, Delta was one of the most volatile states in the region and experienced episodes of violent armed conflict. Armed violence in the region has experienced peaks and troughs over the past decade. At least 2,000 people have been killed and thousands more injured. And property worth tens of millions of Naira has been destroyed and entire communities completely wiped out.

Armed violence in the Delta has been reported to occur in two interrelated, multi-layered cycles.

On the surface, violence is tied to election cycles: political actors recruit and arm youths in the run-up to polls; bands of youths use violence and intimidation on voting day to influence the results. Then a failure to demilitarise these groups following elections leads to the emergence of new militant organisations, with discrete command structures and objectives, resulting in more violence.

An endogenous logic of violence means that with each new militant group that emerges in the region, attacks increase in intensity and levels of destruction so as to demand government attention. This intensification of violence affects the Delta most of all.307

Recorded patterns in armed violence appear to largely fit this analysis. Elections throughout Nigeria have been marred by vote-rigging, fraud, and violence, but this pattern has been pronounced in the Niger Delta, where politicians are reported to sponsor gangs to target opponents and supporters.308

In this volatile environment, events such as the proposed termination of an amnesty programme for militants, and the upcoming 2015 federal and local elections, could serve as key flashpoints for armed violence in an unstable region. (with some off-shore platforms in the Gulf of Guinea), and underpins the country’s deeply dysfunctional political economy and endemic corruption. Despite the location of vast amounts of resource wealth in this region, uneven and under-development plague the Delta.