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**QUESTION: WRITE AN ESSAY ON VIOLENT CONFLICT IN THE GEO-POLITICAL ZONE THAT YOU ARE FROM. NOT LESS THAN TWO PAGES.**

The Federal Republic of Nigeria comprises of 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The states are grouped into six geopolitical zones -North Central, North East, North West, South West, South East and South South. Each state in Nigeria belongs to a geopolitical zone. The North Central zone comprises of Niger, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateaau, Kogi and Kwara states. The Federal capital territory is attached to the North Central zone. In the North East zone-Gombe, Bauchi, Yobe, Borno, Adamawa and Taraba states. Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi, Zamfara and Sokoto states make up the North West zone. The states in the South West zone are Ekiti, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Ogun and Lagos. The South East states are Abia, Imo, Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra. The South South zone is made up of Rivers, Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Bayelsa states. I am from the South South geopolitical zone as I come from Rivers state.

Nigeria, has been and is still being perturbed by various types of conflicts. Conflict is a serious disagreement or argument about something important, typically a protracted one. Violent conflict involves at least two parties using physical force to resolve competing claims or interests. Conflicts that plague Nigeria include ethnic conflict, ethno-religious conflicts, religious conflict, political conflict, indigene-settler conflict, resources conflict, land disputes, militancy, insurgency(Boko Haram). Some conflict types are more prevalent in some geopolitical zones than others. The North East and North West face extreme religious conflict. The North Central region of the country is manned by ethno-religious and indigene-settler conflict. Political conflict is the form of conflict that takes place in South West Nigeria. In the East, conflict has arisen a number of times because of the fight for independence and secession. In the South South zone, also known as the Niger Delta where I come from, the prevailing conflicts are conflicts over land and resources. Generally, conflicts in the region are extremely violent. The nation generates most of its revenue from oil export even though it operates a mixed economy system. Before the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in 1956, agriculture was the mainstay of Nigeria. The black gold is sourced from the Niger Delta region. Most of the oil blocks and oil wells in Nigeria are situated in the South South. As the main place where the source of nation’s income is sourced, Niger Delta is subject to all manner of exploration and exploitation. Oil companies, mostly foreign and multinational, established their presence in the region. On a daily basis, oil is drilled, gases are flared, oil barrels loaded. The exploration of oil has led to environmental pollution, soil degradation, loss of aquatic life, biological annihilation. In the course of oil production, oil spillages occur both on land and water. People are rendered homeless because of government claims over land that contain oil or due to inability to habit the environment owing to pollution. Sporadic fires also lead to mass destruction of lives and property. Gas flaring has led to depletion of the ozone layer and black soot. Violent crisis has characterized the Niger Delta for many years. Niger Delta, for the longest time, has been a victim of marginalization and uneven development in spite of the vast wealth of resources in the region. Agitations stem from the fact that the region though rich in black gold is categorically poor. Instead of progressive development, high rates of unemployment, poverty, hunger, ecological degradation, armed conflicts, wide inequality between the selected few employees of oil companies and the ordinary Niger Delta man or woman are what characterize the region. In addition to conflict over resources, ethnic and political conflicts are also sources of violent conflict in the South South. Clashes between communities occur because of the struggle for land and illegal refineries where oil is processed and sold at the black market. The violent political conflict in the Niger Delta is very to the conflict that occurs in the South West. Pre-election, election, post-election periods in the South South zone are not happy times. It is a thing of normalcy for politicians to hire thugs to increase their prospects of winning elections. Of course, these thugs are impoverished, unemployed, uneducated youths who see it as an opportunity to earn their bread for survival. These politicians provide funds as well as arms to thugs to perpetuate violence during elections. Rigging, stealing of ballot boxes, intimidation of voters and electoral officials are recurrent practices during elections in Nigeria. These corrupt acts are carried out by the recruited thugs of various politicians. Many a time, politicians send thugs to assault or eliminate opponents or to cause fear in the opposition camp. This one of the reason politics in Nigeria is termed as ´do or die´. Also, it is the reason for the continuous hold of power by unpopular government in the country. After elections, weapons provided to thugs are not retrieved. This leads to the use of these arms as instruments for perpetuation of other criminal activities like armed robbery, kidnap, murder. Rivers, Delta, Edo and Bayelsa states are the worst hit by incidences of armed conflict. In 2005, an estimated number of 100 militant groups existed in Rivers State alone. These militant groups agitated for control of a greater part of the oil wealth in the state. In their cause, these groups wreaked havoc in the state. Oil bunkering-oil smuggle and theft became rampant in the state. Kidnapping of high profile employees of oil companies, expatriates, influential members of society, politicians and their relations became normal in the state. The militant groups demanded millions in turn for the release of the kidnapped persons. Sometimes, even after ransom is paid, hostages are killed and their bodies dumped in pits or on the roads. The influx of militancy and violence in the Niger Delta region led to the initiation of the Amnesty program in June, 2009 by government. The Amnesty program was initiated by the Yar’Adua administration. The amnesty program was an offer of unconditional pardon and cash payments to militants who surrendered their arms and ammunitions at screening centers. To show their readiness to show pardon, the president released Henry Okah, a suspected leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta(MEND), the most active militant group at the time after he accepted amnesty. Ebikabowei Victor Ben, a MEND leader in Bayelsa was also granted pardon. Cultism, is also a prominent evil in Rivers state. Though prevalent in tertiary/higher institutions of learning, elements of cultism exist in secondary institutions. Youths join various cult groups due to influence by peers, academic success, high social profile etc. Practices of cult constitute an anomaly. Often, clashes and rivalries occur between cult groups and in the course of fights, they unleash mayhem on the community. If there are no clashes, then cult groups corroborate and constitute a nuisance to society. The University of Port Harcourt has been a focal point of cult clashes and rivalries. Many have been killed, maimed, assaulted because of these conflicts. The cause of violent conflict in Delta state is similar to that of Rivers, though, violence in Delta preceded the discovery of oil. The people of Delta are aggrieved by the uneven development, poor amenities despite exploration of the state for crude oil. To show their grievances they engage in violent demonstrations. Violence in Delta is also tied to election period (political conflict). Patterns of armed violence have been recorded during elections in the state-politicians use thugs to rig and influence results. Afterwards, failure to retrieve the weapons given to the thugs lead to proliferation of more militant groups making the situation worse than it was elections before. Edo was one of Niger Delta’s more violent states on a per-capita basis from 2012 through 2014. Issues in Edo range from violent protests, criminality, abductions, bank robberies, land disputes, domestic violence to clashes between gangs, cults, political groups and communities. Incidents of insecurity in Bayelsa state include cult violence, piracy, abductions, attacks on energy infrastructure. Sometime in Bayelsa, ex-militants attacked cluster oil wells several times protesting their exclusion from the federal amnesty program. Also, women barricaded an oil facility claiming that the company had failed to meet its obligations to the community but instead brought environmental degradation to the community. Akwa Ibom state experiences land conflict, political tensions, protests and abductions. For years, the main conflict in Cross River state was the territorial dispute over the oil-rich Bekasi peninsula with Cameroun. After a resolution by UN, the peninsula was handed to Cameroun. Other issues in Cross River are periodic outbreaks of inter-communal violence, cultism and piracy. Violence in Cross River has tended to be episodic with brief lethal spikes, leading to the deaths of many at a time. Recently, there has been considerate drop in violent conflicts. Rivers state still experiences different forms of violence. Generally, since the declaration of amnesty by the government in 2009, violent conflict in the South South zone has dropped significantly. Though there are situations of occasional unrest, Niger Delta, in recent times has been relatively calm. Diverse civil society organizations have sprung up. Rehabilitation centers for ex militants have been set up in different locations. Skill acquisition programs and centers have also been put up. The Oil and Gas Foundation has supported the reintegration process by investing funds in projects commenced by militants at the community level.

Solutions can be proffered to curb violence in the South South geopolitical zone. Government should dive into investigation of incidents of armed conflicts, including the fishing out of cartels sponsoring armed groups. Adequate compensation of citizens and persons who have suffered losses would be in order. Investigation of abuse of power by security forces. Provision of camps for internally displaced persons. Prosecution of individuals guilty of abuse of human rights. Equipment of state security forces with weapons and facilities to fight back armed groups. Adoption of efficient measures to protect citizens during times of violence. Creation of methods to stop illegal flow of arms into the zone. Training of security agents on human rights in violent and peaceful times. Insurance of government compliance to the Freedom of Information Act to provide data and statistics about incidents of violent conflict. Implementation of the above solutions will go a long way to put a stop to violent conflicts in Niger Delta.