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VIOLENT CONFLICT ON THE NIGER DELTA MILITANTS

A violent conflict involves at least two parties using physical force to resolve competing claims or interests. While a violent conflict may involve only non state actors, often, the term is seen as a synonym for war which involves at least one government.

Conflicts arises due to clash of interests or certain factors. The current conflict in the Niger Delta of the South- south region, first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups who feel they are being exploited, particularly the Ogoni and the Ijaw. Struggle for oil wealth has fueled violence between ethnic groups, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups, Nigerian military and police forces.

Economically, petroleum was discovered in Ogoni land in 1957, just one year after the discovery of Nigeria's first commercial petroleum deposit. Royal Dutch Shell and Chevron corporation set up shop there throughout the next two decades. The Ogoni people, a minority ethnic group and other ethnic groups in the region attest that during this time, the government began forcing them to abandon their land to oil companies without consultation, offering negligible compensation.

The constitutional amendment at that time, gave the federal government full ownership and rights to all Nigerian territory and also declared that eminent domain compensation for seized land would "be based on the value of the crops on the land at the time of its acquisition, not on the value of the land itself." The Nigerian government could now distribute the land to oil companies as it deemed fit.

The 1970s and 1980s saw government's promised benefits for the Niger Delta peoples fall through and fail to materialize, with the Ogoni growing increasingly dissatisfied and their environmental, social, and economic apparatus rapidly deteriorating. The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was formed in 1992, spearheaded by Ogoni playwright and author Ken Saro- Wiwa became the major organization representing the Ogoni people in their struggle for ethnic and environmental rights. Its primary targets, and at times adversaries, have been the Nigerian government and Royal Dutch Shell.

Beginning in December 1992, the conflict between the Ogoni and the oil companies escalated to a level of greater seriousness and intensity on both sides. Both parties began carrying out acts of violence and MOSOP issued an ultimatum to the oil companies, demanding about \$10 billion in accumulated royalties, damages and compensation, and "immediate stoppage of environmental degradation", as well as negotiations for mutual agreement on all future drilling.

The Ogoni's threatened mass action to disrupt oil company operations if they failed to comply with MOSOP demands, and thereby shifted the focus of their actions from the unresponsive federal government to the oil companies producing in the region. The rationale for this

assignment of responsibility was the benefits accrued by the oil companies from extracting the natural wealth of the Ogoni homeland, and the central government's neglectful failure to act.

The government responded by banning public gatherings and declaring disturbances to oil production to acts of treason. Oil extraction from the territory slowed to a trickle of 10,000 barrels per day, which was about five percent of the nation's total.

Military repression escalated in May 1994. On May 21, soldiers and mobile policemen appeared in most Ogoni villages. On that day, four Ogoni chiefs (all on the conservative side of a schism within MOSOP over strategy) were brutally murdered. Saro-Wiwa, head of the opposing faction, had been denied entry to Ogoni land on the day of the murders, but he was detained in connection with the killings. The occupying forces, led by Major Paul Okuntimo of Rivers State Internal Security, claimed to be 'searching for those directly responsible for the killings of the four Ogonis.' However, witnesses say that they engaged in terror operations against the general Ogoni population. By mid-June, the security forces had razed 30 villages, detained 600 people and killed at least 40. This figure eventually rose to 2,000 civilian deaths and the displacement of around 100,000 internal refugees.

In May 1994, nine activists from the movement who later became known as 'The Ogoni Nine', among them Ken Saro-Wiwa, were arrested and accused of incitement to murder following the deaths of four Ogoni elders. Saro-Wiwa and his comrades denied the charges, but were imprisoned for over a year before being found guilty and sentenced to death by a specially-convened tribunal, hand-selected by General Sani Abacha, on 10 November 1995. The activists were denied due process and upon being found guilty, were hanged by the Nigerian state.

The executions met with an immediate international response. The trial was widely criticized by human rights organizations and the governments of other states, who condemned the Nigerian government's long history of detaining its critics, mainly pro-democracy and other political activists. The Commonwealth of Nations which had pleaded for clemency, suspended Nigeria's membership in response to the executions.

Shell claimed to have asked the Nigerian government to show clemency towards those found guilty, but said its request was refused. However, a 2001 report found that "two witnesses that accused them [Saro-Wiwa and the other activists] later admitted that Shell and the military had bribed them with promises of money and jobs at Shell. Shell admitted having given money to the Nigerian military, who brutally tried to silence the voices which claimed justice.

As of 2006, the situation in Ogoni land has eased significantly, assisted by the transition to democratic rule in 1999. However, no attempts have been made by the government or any international body to bring about justice by investigating and prosecuting those involved in the violence and property destruction that have occurred in Ogoni land, although individual plaintiffs have brought a class action lawsuit against Shell in the US.

However, in December 1998, All Ijaw Youths Conference crystallized the Ijaw's struggle for petroleum resource control with the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and the issuing of the Kaiama Declaration. In it, long-held Ijaw concerns about the loss of control over their homeland and their own lives to the oil companies were joined with a commitment to direct action. In the declaration, and in a letter to the companies, the Ijaws called for oil companies to suspend operations and withdraw from Ijaw territory. The IYC pledged "to struggle peacefully for freedom, self-determination and ecological justice," and prepared a campaign of celebration, prayer, and direct action, beginning December 28.

In December 1998, two warships and 10–15,000 Nigerian troops occupied Bayelsa and Delta State as the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) mobilized for Operation Climate Change. Soldiers entered Bayelsa, the state capital of [Yenagoa](#), announced they had come because youths were trying to stop the oil companies. On the morning of December 30, two thousand young people processed through Yenagoa, dressed in black, singing and dancing. Soldiers opened fire with rifles, machine guns, and tear gas, killing at least three protesters and arresting twenty-five more. After a march demanding the release of those detained was turned back by soldiers, three more protesters were shot dead including Nwashuku Okeri and Ghadafi Ezeifile. The military declared a state of emergency throughout Bayelsa state, imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and banned meetings. At military roadblocks, local residents were severely beaten or detained. At night, soldiers invaded private homes, terrorizing residents with beatings and raping the women and girls.

On January 4, 1999 about one hundred soldiers from the military base at Chevron's Escravos facility attacked Opia and Ikiyan, two Ijaw communities in Delta State. Bright Pablogba, the traditional leader of Ikiyan, who came to the river to negotiate with the soldiers, was shot along with a seven-year-old girl and possibly dozens of others. Of the approximately 1,000 people living in the two villages, four people were found dead and sixty-two were still missing months after the attack. The same soldiers set the villages ablaze, destroyed canoes and fishing equipment, killed livestock, and destroyed churches and religious shrines.

Nonetheless, Operation Climate Change continued, and disrupted Nigerian oil supplies through much of 1999 by turning off valves through Ijaw territory. In the context of high conflict between the Ijaw and the Nigerian Federal Government (and its police and army), the military carried out the Odi massacre, killing scores if not hundreds of Ijaws.

Subsequent actions by Ijaws against the oil industry included both renewed efforts at nonviolent action and attacks on oil installations and foreign oil workers.

However, Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established in 2000 by President Olusegun Obasanjo with the sole mandate of developing the petroleum-rich Niger-Delta region of southern Nigeria. Since its inauguration, the NDDC has focused on the development of social and physical infrastructures, ecological/environmental remediation and human development. The NDDC was created largely as a response to the demands of the population of the Niger Delta, a populous area inhabited by a diversity of minority ethnic groups. During the 1990s these ethnic groups, most notably the Ijaw and the Ogoni established organizations to confront the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies such as Shell. The minorities of the Niger Delta have continued to agitate and articulate demands for greater autonomy and control of the area's petroleum resources.