

# Conflict Briefing:

## Ogoniland: Remediating a Troubled Region

June 2017



### Introduction

Ogoniland has long been an area symbolic in the minds of people both inside and outside of the Niger Delta for its struggle against environmental degradation caused by resource exploitation. In the early 1990s, the region came to international prominence after the death of environmental activist Kenule Saro-Wiwa. The struggle of Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists eventually led to the cessation of oil production activities in the area in 1993, but widespread environmental damage was already done. A United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) assessment on the impacts of decades of resource exploitation in Ogoniland, commissioned in 2006 by former President General Olusegun Obasanjo and released in 2011, has informed a wide scale government clean-up of the region. At the same time, Ogoniland has been beset by many of the same conflict dynamics that affect the wider Niger Delta; including cultism, militancy, the proliferation of weapons, intra- and intercommunal conflict, chieftaincy tussles, and widespread youth unemployment. The region has become highly polarized during recent election cycles, with politicians, militants and security figures recruiting cultists and restive youth to intimidate and coerce adversaries and opponents.

In recognition of the complex dynamics at play in the region and the need to restore security to the area to effectively address widespread environmental degradation, the Rivers State

government announced a special amnesty programme for the area in March 2017. Following on from a 60-day demobilization effort that commenced in September 2016, the new amnesty programme is a fresh attempt to encourage current militants to disavow violence, lay down their weapons, and re-join society in a productive manner. While both the Clean-up Project and the renewed amnesty programme are an attempt to restore security and economic viability to Ogoniland, multiple overlapping and intertwined factors are still at play that could spell the success or failure of these efforts. The following brief examines those dynamics and proposes some concrete steps for consideration by the government, civil society organizations, and other key stakeholders concerned with restoring security and creating economic livelihood in the critical region of the Niger Delta.

### Background

Ogoniland is a region covering some 1,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the southeast of the Niger Delta basin. The area is divided administratively into four local government areas: Khana, Gokana, Tai, and Eleme with a total of 226 communities. Although there has been no official census taken in Ogoni since 2006, in several impact assessments conducted by the World Bank and other private research institutions, it has been estimated to currently have a population between 1.5-2 million, making it one of the mostly densely populated regions in the world. Traditionally, the area is formed by six kingdoms (Babbe, Eleme, Gokana, Ken-Khana, Nyo-Khana and Tai) with His Majesty King Godwin N.K. Gininwa presently serving as the region's Paramount Ruler.

According to the 2011 UNEP Assessment Report, at the time of the cessation of oil production activities in 1993, the area had twelve oil fields, 116 drilled wells with 89 completed, five flow stations, and the capacity to produce 185,000

barrels per day (bpd).

The cessation of oil production in Ogoni was the result of the successful campaign by the Ogoni people against environmental damage and neglect of the area by both the operating oil company, Shell Petroleum and Development Company (SPDC), and the federal government. The crisis generated by the struggle for environmental security in Ogoni culminated in the extra-judicial killing of Kenule Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni activists by the military regime of late General Sani Abacha in November 1995, sparking international outcry.

In an effort to ensure the environmental clean-up and remediation in past oil impacted sites in Ogoniland, President Obasanjo's Administration in 2006 commissioned the UNEP to carry out an Environmental Assessment Study of the oil impacted sites in Ogoniland, which lasted from 2009-2011. In June 2016, the Federal Government formally launched the clean-up project, as recommended in the UNEP report.

In recent times, Ogoniland has once again become a theatre of crisis caused by varying degrees of interrelated criminal, communal, and political factors. These issues are not peculiar to Ogoniland as they equally drive insecurity in other parts of Rivers state. However, the situation in Ogoni presents a confluence of historical and present-day factors that put it at heightened risk for conflict. In particular, the underlying factors that have given rise to insecurity in the past are manifesting alongside plans by the Federal Government to commence the process of restoring the oil-impacted ecosystem in Ogoni to its original condition, which will help revamp the traditional livelihood activities, mainly farming and fishing, of the people.

## Interrelated Dynamics Fueling Insecurity

The increasing incidences of violence in Ogoni can be situated within the context of multiple interrelated and often overlapping conflict dynamics, namely: cultism, unemployment/poverty, politics, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, substance abuse, chieftaincy tussles, and intra- and intercommunal conflicts. These factors have varying degrees of impact on the overall environment of insecurity in Ogoni.

The origin of cultism and gang violence in Ogoni can be traced to 1990s when the Vikings Confraternity started recruiting members from secondary schools across the state to establish the Junior Vikings Confraternity (JVC). Following this, the subsequent advent of the Debam, Dewell, Icelanders, and Greenlanders cult groups also played a role in the rise of cultism in the region. Of the major cult groups, Dewell and the Icelanders are reportedly well-structured and have the highest membership in Ogoni. Their highest command structure is said to be composed of a prominent warlord and ex-militant, from outside of Ogoniland.

Politically, the build-up to the 2015 general elections polarised Rivers State. State and non-state militant and cult groups took sides, armed by political elites to intimidate opponents. This fed into the supremacy battles occurring among the various cult gangs and promoted an overall economy of violence, giving rise to the

proliferation and use of weapons by rival cult groups in the post-election period. Also contributing to the volume of arms in circulation and the resultant insecurity, particularly in Ogoni, is the fact that some cult members reportedly fund their activities from the oil bunkering business, popularly known as *Kpofire*, and are able to procure arms from the proceeds of this and other illicit trades, such as drugs.

Armed gangs in Ogoni are also utilized as mercenaries-for-hire. For example, many cultists in Ogoni reportedly worked for the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) during the 2015 general elections, as well as in the first rerun election. However, during the last rerun election in Rivers state, many were said to have switched sides and worked for the All Progressives Congress (APC), allegedly the highest bidder at that time. According to interviews with key figures from the area and from feedback received during workshops, it has become well-known in the region that the stronger and more well-armed the gang, the higher the chances that it will be employed by the political class.

Politics as a major driver of violence in Rivers State has a historical precedent. From 1999 through to the 2015 general elections, and during the subsequent rerun elections in the state, there has been a demonstrated cycle of politically motivated violence, which usually peaks during elections, recedes much later, and then re-emerges at the next round of elections.

Additionally, some state security personnel are

said to know the perpetrators of politically-motivated violence but reportedly either receive financial incentives to overlook their activities or are afraid of being punished by the powerful figures who control them; such as being recommended for deployments to far-flung regions outside of the region. This fear is underscored by reported cases where security personnel have made arrests of known perpetrators of violence, only to have politicians interfere in the case and facilitate the quick release of the perpetrators from custody. These perpetrators or their cronies may then attempt to exact revenge, further dissuading local security forces from getting involved in the first place.

Similar to the effect of state-level politics on the security challenges in Ogoni, another contributing factor to insecurity at the community level is the quest for relevance and influence among some community chieftains in the area. Owing to the numerous chieftaincy tussles occurring in the region, as well as broader intra- and intercommunal conflicts in Ogoni, some paramount rulers and chiefs have reportedly aligned themselves with armed groups, using the same manipulative and violent tactics as politicians to settle scores.

Compounding matters, it is reported by local stakeholders that many members of armed gangs in the area are drug users who often indulge in kidnapping, armed robbery, and other illicit activities to raise money to fund their lifestyle. Examining the relationship between drug consumption and its impact on peace and security

### Reported incidents and fatalities in Ogoniland

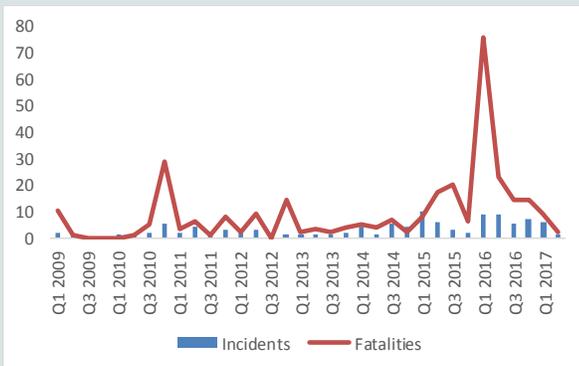


Figure 1: Reported incidents in Ogoniland from Jan 2009 - Apr 2017, show a spike in violence ahead of elections in 2011, 2015 and rerun elections in 2016. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> using ACLED, CIEPD, Nigeria Watch and P4P SMS Data

### Reported fatalities by LGA in Ogoniland

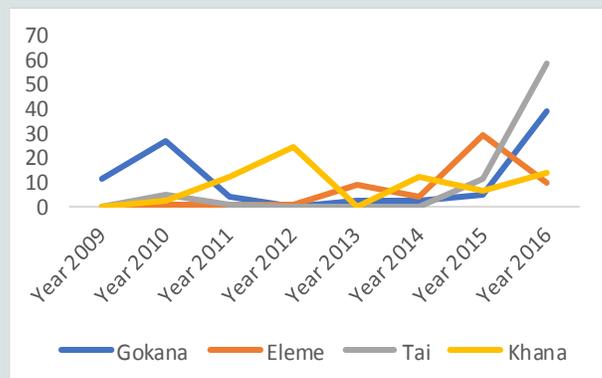


Figure 2: Reported fatalities in Ogoniland from Jan 2015 - April 2017 show a n increase in violent deaths in the different LGAs since 2015. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> using ACLED and Nigeria Watch

at the local and state levels in Nigeria, a September 2016 report from International Alert titled, "Rethinking Drug Policy from a Peacebuilding Perspective: Case Studies in Afghanistan, Colombia, Peru, and Nigeria," identified the area as a hotspot for the use and abuse of psychoactive substances.

## Insecurity and the Ogoni Clean-Up Project

In interviews and dialogues held with local stakeholders, it was noted that the Ogoni Clean-up project itself has become a part of the problem in fuelling the spate of violence in the area. Right from the start, when the UNEP report on Ogoni was published, popular expectations of financial benefits were heightened. Many local communities believe that the clean-up project will come with a multitude of financial benefits in the form of contracts to local employees and businesses, more overall investment in infrastructure, and the elevation of local power brokers to key positions of influence. Many recall a reported case in Bodo, Gokana LGA, where compensations were paid to the community by a multinational oil company and elevated locals to key positions of power with influence over the allocation of money and resources. Memories of this case and others have triggered competition among those who feel they are stakeholders in Ogoni and should be given a prime seat at the table when discussing aspects of the Clean-up project in the region and how contracts and compensations are doled out. Cultists and other armed groups have similarly become engaged and are perpetrating violence,

trying to lay claim to territories to ensure that they would later be in charge of lucrative security surveillance contracts or other opportunities that may arise from the project. To date, there has reportedly been insufficient effort to manage the expectations of the Ogonis or mitigate the potential conflict risks arising from these false assumptions, either through sensitization campaigns or ongoing community dialogues and stakeholder's forums.

As in other parts of the Niger Delta, and indeed in other conflicted regions worldwide, it is often those most responsible for the perpetration of insecurity that then come forth to claim the largest security contracts, claiming to protect others from the very chaos that they themselves have sown. Nevertheless, and despite its origins, the current state of insecurity in the area will likely have direct impacts on the Ogoni clean-up project. In fact, some have expressed fear that the current environment of insecurity will encourage delays and excuses on the part of the government and others that the clean-up project cannot be implemented because of threats to the safety and security of those tasked with implementation. Specifically, as the process of carrying out the project will involve multiple outside technical experts who will be working directly with local community members, it is feared that many will reject such an arrangement given the highly volatile environment.

As noted earlier, at the present juncture, armed groups have effectively balkanised the Ogoni space, laying claims to laying claims to different territories and forcing some paramount rulers, who might be

## History of Insecurity in Ogoniland

**1990**– Formation of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP).

**1993**– Mass protests result in SPDC pull-out from region.

**1995**– Execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders by the Abacha regime.

**2006**– President Obasanjo commissions UNEP to conduct an Environmental Assessment in Ogoni.

**2011**– MOSOP adopts political platform for Ogoniland autonomy ahead of national elections.

**2015**– Elections lead to fighting among Ogoni leadership based on competing political/cult group allegiances.

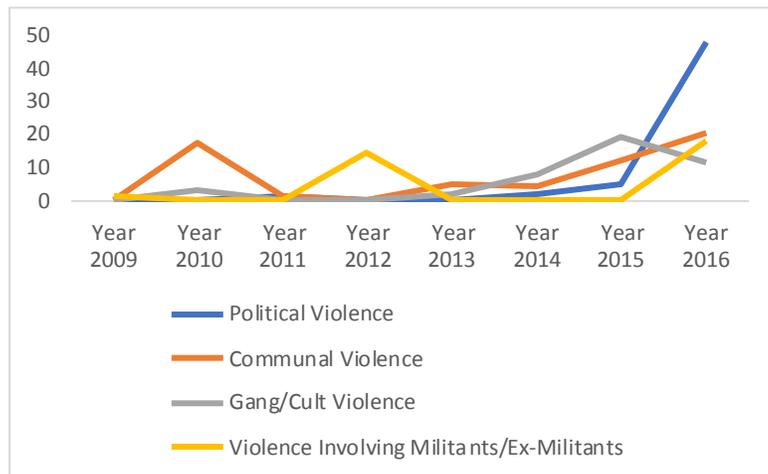


Figure 3: Reported fatalities in Ogoniland from Jan 2009 - Apr 2017, show a spike in political violence from 2015 through 2016. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/> using ACLED and Nigeria Watch Data

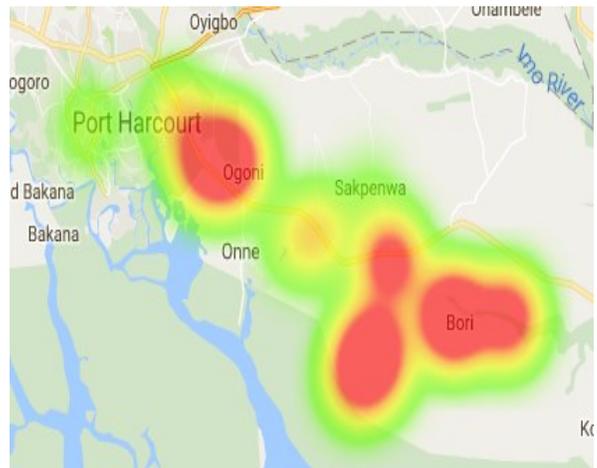


Figure 4: Heat Map showing the concentration of violent incidents in Ogoniland. Data sources: All sources used from integrated P4P Peace Map <http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/>

hideouts. Once exposed, they would again become vulnerable to being compelled by various power-brokers to do their bidding. In the case of the election rerun, there was a widely held suspicion that the APC would use the military to rig the rerun election and that the use of these former “strongmen” was a means to counter this threat. This perception fueled the widely reported news of some politicians asking cult gangs loyal to them to not take part in the state amnesty programme in Ogoni, saying it was a ploy to get them to surrender their arms thereby making themselves vulnerable to attacks by rival gangs.

To date, it is perceived by many locals that while the state government has carried out the disarmament part of the program, it has had a negligible effect in reducing crime. Underscoring this, the State Amnesty Chairperson was also on record following the process, stating that the arms submitted during the disarmament in Ogoni did not in any way represent the true number of arms in circulation in the area. Additionally, the disarmament effort has not addressed the root of cultism and is viewed to have merely taken away weapons from the cultists, while no meaningful steps have been taken to reintegrate them into society and provide a means of livelihood for them. In considering the complex history of the region, and the interplay of conflict dynamics, the past may well be prologue in Ogoniland. It is therefore critical that stakeholders from both within and outside the region act now to prevent the resurgence in crime and cult related violence, especially as the 2019 elections draw close. Unless official efforts to restore stability and economic vitality to the region through the Clean-up Project and amnesty programme occur alongside holistic and local-level efforts at dialogue and reconciliation, there remains the real possibility that this vital region may return to the dark days of its past.

## The Way Forward

1. The Rivers State Amnesty Programme should be properly implemented in conjunction with a new strategy for broad-based community engagement in the process, designed in consultation with local stakeholders.
2. To enhance the sustainability of the Ogoni Clean-Up Initiative and provide vital employment for at-risk youth, programmes should be explored to train repentant cultists in aquaculture, animal husbandry, agri-business and other viable trades while establishing micro-credit facilities and cooperatives to lend and pool resources.
3. There should be a locally driven, robust, and locally implemented mechanism for dialogue and reconciliation at the community and local government levels. Examples of local reconciliation and remediation processes from outside and inside of the region should be examined to determine if some best practices in design and implementation hold relevance for Ogoni.
4. Local governments and other key stakeholders in Ogoni need to directly engage various communities to sensitize people on the Clean-Up project and their roles, and to manage expectations. Trusted local civil society networks could be key allies in this process.
5. In addition to the Amnesty Programme, there should be a dedicated overall effort aimed at removing small arms and light weapons in the area. Best practices and lessons learned from both inside and outside of the Niger Delta and Nigeria should be scrutinized for potential relevance to the local context, and adopted and adjusted accordingly. National and International governments and NGO/INGO partners with experience in implementing such programmes should be engaged to help support efforts.