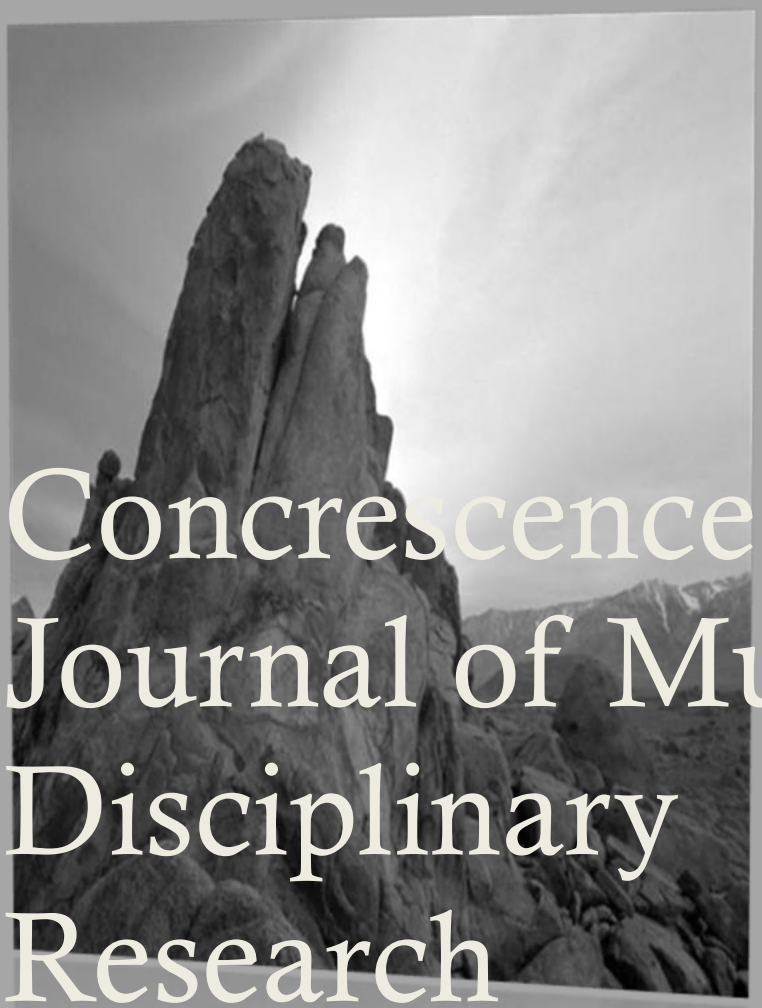

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Security Challenges and Presidential Amnesty in the Niger Delta: The Way Forward

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Abstract
The Federal Government of Nigeria introduced the Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009 as a strategic response to the security challenges in the Niger Delta, where militant activities had resulted in widespread violence, destruction of property, and damage to critical infrastructure, including oil facilities operated by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation. This study examines the impact of the Amnesty Programme on security in the region, focusing on its Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) components. Using the Frustration-Aggression theory, the research highlights how decades of neglect and underdevelopment fueled grievances that led to militancy and instability. The Amnesty Programme aimed to restore security and enhance crude oil production by addressing these concerns. Through a qualitative research approach, drawing from both primary and secondary data sources, the study establishes a clear link between the programme, improved national security, and increased oil production. However, while the amnesty initiative has contributed to short-term stability, the underlying socio-economic challenges in the Niger Delta remain largely unaddressed. To ensure lasting peace and security, the study recommends that the federal government implement comprehensive and sustainable development strategies that tackle the root causes of insecurity in the region.

Keywords: Security, Challenges, Presidential Amnesty, Militancy

Introduction

Before the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta in 1958, the region was an untouched environment, rich in subsistence resources, particularly in farming, fishing, and traditional crafts such as pottery and mat-making. The area also had a thriving commercial fisheries industry (Afinotan, 2019). The discovery of oil in 1956 at Oloibiri, in the Otokopiri clan, marked a turning point not only for the Niger Delta but for Nigeria as a whole (Aaron, 2010). Oil quickly became the country's dominant economic resource, accounting for over 90 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings (Owugah, 2018). While the Nigerian state

saw this as a blessing, the people of the Niger Delta perceived it as a curse. The relentless exploitation of oil led to severe environmental degradation, socio-economic neglect, and increasing poverty in the oil-producing communities (Omotola, 2017).

Owugah (2018) points out the paradox of oil wealth: while it has brought immense prosperity to the national government and elites, it has simultaneously caused widespread poverty, disease, and death among local populations. The failure of both the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies to address these social and environmental crises fueled the rise of militant groups in the region. These groups, including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), articulated their grievances through violent protests, demanding environmental justice and economic equity (Aaron, 2021).

The violence in the Niger Delta intensified with the emergence of various militant groups from the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS) in 1966 to MEND in 2006 (Eseduwo, 2020). Between 1997 and 2006, communities across the region, including Gbaramatu (Delta State), Ogulagha (Delta State), and Bodo (Rivers State), witnessed escalating violence that led to widespread displacement, loss of life, and significant disruptions to oil production (Alagoa, 2016). The root causes of these uprisings were deeply rooted in poverty, environmental degradation, militarization, and political marginalization, with communities demanding greater political autonomy and a more equitable share of oil revenues. For instance, in Gbaramatu, a community in Delta State, residents faced severe environmental damage due to oil spills and gas flaring, which devastated their farmlands and fishing resources, triggering protests and armed resistance against oil companies. Similarly, in the Bodo community of Rivers State, oil spills from Shell's operations resulted in widespread ecological damage, exacerbating the socio-economic challenges already plaguing the local population. In Bayelsa State, communities like Ekeremor have struggled with the destruction of mangrove forests and fishing grounds, driving local youth to join militant groups in protest against the lack of compensation and infrastructural development (Alagoa, 2016).

In response to the escalating violence, under President Umaru Yar'Adua, the Nigerian government launched the Presidential Amnesty Programme in June 2009. This initiative, which adopted the strategy of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR), had proven effective in countries like Rwanda, Liberia, and Sierra Leone (Berdal, 2020; Muggah, 2021). DDR aims to reintegrate former combatants into society while addressing the security and socio-economic conditions that fuel conflict. The amnesty program was seen as a crucial step toward de-escalating tensions in the Niger Delta, offering hope for preventing the situation from spiraling into a full-scale war (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2020; United Nations, 2020).

Despite some reductions in violence, the program has faced both praise and criticism. While it has had some success in curbing immediate unrest, it has not tackled the root causes of the region's conflict. Consequently, the quest for sustainable peace in the Niger Delta remains an urgent need, requiring a more comprehensive approach to addressing the region's underlying socio-economic challenges.

Statement of the Problem

The ongoing insecurity in the Niger Delta, despite the deployment of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) to restore order, highlights the failure of the government's approach to addressing the root causes of militancy. The underlying issues of poverty, environmental

degradation, political marginalization, and the exploitation of natural resources have fueled persistent unrest in the region. While the government's strategy of disarmament and demobilization through the Amnesty Programme introduced in 2009 aimed to quell the violence, it has proven insufficient. The programme focuses primarily on the return of weapons and the disbanding of militant groups. Yet, it fails to address the broader socio-economic and political challenges contributing to militancy. A key limitation lies in the lack of a comprehensive reintegration framework for former combatants, leaving them vulnerable to rearmament or recruitment by external factions seeking to exploit emerging political opportunities.

Moreover, multinational oil companies, accused of exacerbating environmental degradation, human rights violations, and the depletion of local resources, have not done enough to resolve critical issues surrounding compensation, protection of victims, and the restoration of livelihoods in affected communities. Although the Amnesty Programme initially aimed to reduce violence and create space for development, many projects have remained abandoned or incomplete, raising concerns about the programme's long-term impact on regional stability and development. This article, therefore, seeks to analyze the gaps in the government's approach and to suggest a more holistic strategy for addressing the root causes of conflict in the Niger Delta, emphasizing the need for sustainable development, economic empowerment, and genuine dialogue with local communities.

Clarification of Concepts

Security

The concept of security raises a fundamental question: what exactly does security mean? This question is not merely theoretical, as it assumes that security is a tangible condition beyond everyday discourse. Security has been interpreted in various ways throughout history. In the field of International Relations, the debate between Realism and Idealism frames security as either a temporary, relative condition or an ultimate state to be attained in the future. In both perspectives, security is viewed as something objective that can be assessed, enhanced, and maintained.

From this standpoint, security is often understood as a condition where threats to fundamental values are minimized. Baldwin (2021) defines security as "a low probability of damage to acquired values," while Krause and Nye (2020) describe it as "the absence of acute threats to the minimal acceptable levels of the basic values that a people consider essential to survival." These definitions highlight security's primary function, safeguarding key societal values. However, security takes on different meanings depending on the context. A critical question in security studies is: security for whom? It can apply to individuals, states, or non-human entities, such as wildlife conservation or environmental protection. In contemporary discussions, security is often perceived as a fundamental necessity that societies must actively work toward to ensure the well-being and survival of individuals and nations alike.

Amnesty

Amnesty is commonly regarded as a political instrument of reconciliation, granted by a sovereign authority to individuals or groups who have committed acts against the state, such as treason, rebellion, or armed resistance. O'Shea (2021) defines amnesty as a legal and political mechanism that provides immunity from prosecution for politically motivated offenses, including sedition and insurgency. Similarly, Epiphany (2020) describes amnesty

as a state-sanctioned act that exempts individuals or groups from legal consequences for crimes that challenge the state's authority. This legal provision allows governments to "forgive" past offenses before pursuing legal action.

Mallinder (2020) expands on this idea, suggesting that amnesty often involves a trade-off, sacrificing certain aspects of justice in the interest of peace, stability, and reconciliation. Amnesty is frequently granted in post-conflict situations where the state aims to end hostilities and foster national unity. In the case of the Niger Delta, amnesty played a crucial role in efforts to de-escalate violence and stabilize the region. The Niger Delta Amnesty Programme, introduced in 2009, was designed to curb militancy and ensure the uninterrupted extraction of oil resources, which remain central to Nigeria's economy. This initiative was not only in the Federal Government's interest but also benefited multinational oil corporations operating in the region. In this context, amnesty is positioned as a strategic tool for peacebuilding and regional development, though debates persist regarding the fairness, effectiveness, and long-term impact of the program.

Militancy in the Niger Delta

Militancy has been defined in various ways, often associated with acts of violence carried out by individuals, groups, or organizations motivated by political, religious, ideological, economic, or social causes. According to Quamruzzaman (2021), militancy involves the use of force to pursue a cause when peaceful negotiations or legal avenues fail to yield desired outcomes. In contemporary discourse, the term "militant" is sometimes used interchangeably with "terrorist," though their motivations and objectives may differ. Ashimolowo and Odiachi (2012) argue that militancy is often driven by demands for justice, political rights, or economic inclusion. It emerges when marginalized groups believe that their grievances are being ignored or suppressed by those in power. Additionally, militancy can involve individuals who are either coerced or voluntarily recruited into militant organizations to advance a shared agenda.

Chindah and Braide (2021) define militancy as a combative stance or disposition to fight for a cause, often manifesting in violent resistance against perceived political oppression, economic injustice, or social marginalization. In the Niger Delta, militancy has primarily been fueled by long-standing demands for political autonomy, economic equity, and environmental justice. Many communities feel they have been exploited and neglected, despite the vast natural resources extracted from their lands. The destruction of farmlands, water pollution, and the loss of traditional livelihoods, particularly fishing and farming, have exacerbated frustrations, leading some to take up arms in pursuit of their demands.

A key driver of militancy in the Niger Delta is the widespread perception of political and economic marginalization among ethnic minorities in the region. Kowa (2021) notes that the roots of militancy in the Niger Delta predate the discovery of oil, tracing back to early resistance movements such as the AdakaBoro revolt in the 1960s. This uprising was driven by a sense of political exclusion, as ethnic minorities in the region felt dominated by the larger ethnic groups in the then-Eastern Region, particularly the Igbos. The historical struggle for political representation and economic control over local resources laid the foundation for more recent militant agitations in the region.

Militancy in the Niger Delta has been particularly intense in certain areas, with some communities suffering prolonged violence and instability. For instance, in Delta State, the Gbaramatu Kingdom has been a hotspot for militant activities, mainly due to its strategic location along the creeks where many militant camps were established. The region

witnessed significant military raids, particularly in response to attacks on oil facilities and security forces. Similarly, in Rivers State, the Ogoni region, home to the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), has been a focal point of resistance against oil exploitation. The execution of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 further fueled tensions, leading to increased militant activity and crackdowns by security forces. Meanwhile, in Bayelsa State, Southern Ijaw has been a stronghold for militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The area has experienced several violent confrontations between militants and the military, including airstrikes and large-scale operations aimed at dismantling militant camps.

In response to rising militancy, the Nigerian government has introduced various measures to restore order and address grievances in the region. Policies such as the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the creation of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the deployment of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) were designed to mitigate the crisis. However, these efforts have had limited success due to widespread corruption, lack of effective implementation, and the failure to address the underlying economic and environmental injustices that fuel militancy.

The introduction of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in 2009 marked a significant attempt to curb militancy by offering ex-militants a path to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. While the initiative initially reduced violence and increased oil production, its long-term effectiveness remains questionable. Many amnesty beneficiaries struggle with unemployment, and unresolved grievances continue to pose a threat to lasting peace. The persistence of militancy in the Niger Delta underscores the need for a more holistic approach that not only addresses security concerns but also tackles the deep-seated economic, social, and environmental challenges faced by the region's communities.

The Amnesty Programme and DDR in the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region, despite being the economic backbone of Nigeria, remains one of the most underdeveloped areas in the country. The vast oil wealth extracted from this region contributes over 90% of Nigeria's national revenue. However, local communities in Delta State and its neighboring states continue to face extreme poverty, environmental devastation, and poor infrastructure (Eke, 2021). While the region's resources fuel Nigeria's economy, the people living in these areas have long suffered from a crisis of neglect. The failure of both the government and multinational oil companies to invest in the welfare of these communities has exacerbated the region's economic and social struggles (Obi, 2019).
Delta State, as part of the larger Niger Delta, is particularly affected by these issues. Communities that rely on fishing and farming for their livelihoods have seen their environment ravaged by oil spills, gas flaring, and the expansion of oil infrastructure. Despite various attempts by successive governments to address these challenges, such as the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, the impact has been minimal. Youths in the region, feeling disenfranchised and marginalized, have turned to militancy to push for political autonomy, economic equity, and environmental justice (Akinola, 2020).

Militancy in the Niger Delta, especially in Delta State, is deeply rooted in the perceived political and economic exclusion of ethnic minorities. Groups like the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) have engaged in various forms of violent resistance, including pipeline vandalism, hostage-taking, and

attacks on oil facilities. These militant actions, while disruptive, are driven by deeper issues of systemic injustice and the struggle for resource control (Aghalino, 2021).

In response to the rising militancy, the Nigerian government launched the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) in 2009 to address the root causes of violence through a framework of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR). The initiative, initiated by then-President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, offered militants an alternative to violence by providing amnesty, vocational training, and financial assistance. In the initial phase, over 26,000 militants embraced the amnesty offer, leading to a marked reduction in violent activities in the region (Kuku, 2020). However, despite the initial success, the implementation of the programme in Delta State and across the broader Niger Delta has faced numerous challenges.

The DDR process in Delta State included the disarmament of militants, rehabilitation programs, and efforts to reintegrate former combatants into society through vocational training and education. While thousands of ex-combatants were trained in various skills such as welding, maritime services, and oil and gas technology, many former militants expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and duration of the training programs (Oluwaniyi, 2020). Some participants reported poor facilities, inadequate training resources, and mismanagement, leading to a sense of frustration and even resentment toward the program (Oluwaseun, 2020).

The challenges faced by the DDR process were not confined to Delta State alone; other states in the Niger Delta, including Rivers and Bayelsa, experienced similar difficulties. In Rivers State, particularly in the Ogoni region, ex-militants were offered entrepreneurship and agricultural services training. However, despite the vocational skills acquired, many of these ex-fighters struggled to access the necessary capital to start businesses or establish stable livelihoods. Similarly, in Bayelsa State, where groups like MEND and the Niger Delta Avengers had a strong presence, the reintegration process faced significant hurdles. While some former militants received training in maritime services and security, the lack of job opportunities in these sectors led many to remain disillusioned, and some even reverted to militancy (Aghalino, 2021).

Despite the relative cessation of violence in the short term, the long-term reintegration of ex-militants into society has remained sluggish, and the broader issue of underdevelopment in the region persists. While the amnesty program succeeded in temporarily pacifying militant groups and ensuring the continuation of oil production, it did not address the root causes of militancy, such as economic inequality, environmental degradation, and political exclusion. Furthermore, the heavy military presence in the region, intended to maintain security, has contributed to the fragility of peace, with local communities often perceiving the military as an occupying force rather than a protective presence (Ahon, 2020).

A critical perspective on the Amnesty Programme, particularly from groups like MEND, is that the initiative served more to stabilize the situation for oil exploitation rather than genuinely addressing the socio-economic injustices faced by the people of the Niger Delta (Bayagbon, 2020). Nwajiakwu-Dahou (2021) contends that the government's approach has been largely reactive, with amnesty being seen as a temporary fix rather than a comprehensive solution. Peace efforts, including the amnesty, are often viewed as mechanisms for quelling unrest and facilitating uninterrupted oil production, rather than addressing the structural challenges that fuel militancy.

For sustainable peace to take root in the Niger Delta, scholars like Otite and Umukoro (2021) argue that there must be a comprehensive and inclusive development plan. This plan should not only focus on infrastructural development but also ensure political empowerment, environmental justice, and the equitable distribution of oil wealth. Until these deeper issues are addressed, the region will remain vulnerable to future unrest, and the challenges posed by militancy will likely persist. The Amnesty Programme, while reducing violence in the short term, has not provided a lasting solution to the conflict, and the region continues to grapple with significant challenges related to development, resource control, and social justice.

Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth analysis of the impact of the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) across the Niger Delta, with a particular focus on Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States. Militancy in the region emerged as a response to poor governance, environmental degradation, and economic marginalization, all of which have persisted despite decades of oil extraction. Rather than addressing these grievances through meaningful dialogue and sustainable development, the government initially relied on military force and repression, which only deepened tensions and contributed to the radicalization of local resistance groups.

Delta State remains heavily impacted by oil spills and gas flaring, which have devastated traditional livelihoods, particularly in communities reliant on fishing and farming. Despite being a key contributor to Nigeria's oil wealth, the state continues to experience severe underdevelopment and a lack of economic opportunities. Similarly, environmental destruction and political exclusion have fueled discontent in Rivers State, particularly in the Ogoni region and other oil-producing areas. The military crackdowns on activists and militants alike have only exacerbated the conflict. In Bayelsa State, where much of Nigeria's crude oil is extracted, communities grapple with rising unemployment, coastal erosion, and limited access to basic infrastructure, reinforcing a sense of political and economic marginalization.

As militant groups resorted to attacks on oil infrastructure and personnel, the federal government introduced the Amnesty Programme in 2009 to curb instability and restore oil production. While the initiative succeeded in reducing militant activities and increasing oil output, it failed to address the underlying socio-economic and environmental challenges that gave rise to militancy in the first place. Although thousands of ex-militants from Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States have benefited from vocational training and financial support, the broader Niger Delta remains trapped in a cycle of underdevelopment, environmental neglect, and resource-driven conflict.

For long-term peace and stability in Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and the wider Niger Delta region, the Nigerian government must go beyond temporary peace initiatives and prioritize sustainable infrastructure development, economic empowerment, and environmental restoration. Without a committed effort to address the region's core grievances, the risk of renewed militancy remains high, and the long-term security of both the region and the national economy will continue to be at stake.

Recommendations

1. The skill acquisition components of the Amnesty Programme have the potential to benefit local communities and oil companies across Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States if effectively implemented. Oil multinationals operating in the region should reserve job quotas for trained ex-militants and local inhabitants to ensure their integration into the workforce. This would foster a sense of inclusion, reduce hostility toward oil companies, and strengthen community-industry relations, particularly in areas like Warri (Delta), Bonny (Rivers), and Brass (Bayelsa), where tensions remain high due to unemployment and economic exclusion.

2. Many aggrieved youths in Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States were either excluded or hesitant to accept the Amnesty Programme during its initial implementation due to mistrust and skepticism. The federal government should reopen and expand the programme to accommodate these individuals, ensuring they undergo disarmament, skill training, and reintegration. This step would prevent the resurgence of militancy and consolidate peace across the Niger Delta.

3. The excessive deployment of military forces, armored vehicles, and police helicopters in oil-rich communities, such as Gbaramatu (Delta), Ogoni (Rivers), and Nembe (Bayelsa), has often exacerbated tensions rather than resolved conflicts. Rather than relying on militarization, the government should prioritize dialogue, community engagement, and sustainable development as tools for long-term peacebuilding. Strengthening community-led conflict resolution mechanisms and empowering local leaders can prevent violence and build trust between the state and the people.

4. The success of the Amnesty Programme and broader peace initiatives requires coordinated efforts between the federal government, state governments of Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa, local authorities, oil companies, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and other intervention agencies. These stakeholders must actively contribute to skill acquisition, employment creation, and economic empowerment initiatives to ensure a holistic approach to post-conflict recovery across the region.

5. A targeted development strategy should be implemented across Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States, particularly in oil-producing communities such as Warri Southwest and Burutu (Delta), Bonny and Bodo (Rivers), and Yenagoa and Ogbia (Bayelsa). Just as Abuja was rapidly developed through intentional government investment, a similar model should be applied to the Niger Delta to provide modern infrastructure, clean water, healthcare, and quality education. Without addressing these fundamental needs, long-term peace will remain elusive.

By implementing these recommendations, Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, and the entire Niger Delta region can transition from temporary ceasefires to long-term stability and economic prosperity. Addressing the root causes of militancy, marginalization, environmental degradation, and lack of economic opportunities remains the only sustainable path toward a peaceful and thriving Niger Delta.

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