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## THE EFFECTS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF MILITANTS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION ON NIGERIA'S IMAGE ABROAD

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### **Abstract**

*A lot of efforts have been made by various governments to launder Nigeria's image abroad, but most of these efforts have failed. This paper therefore looked at the effects of the activities of militants in the Niger Delta and other parts of Nigeria on the international image of the country. The paper was basically based on library research. Information were sourced from the internet, journalists, magazines, newspapers and other related sources. Findings discussed was based on this. It was found among other things that the activities of these militants have significantly affected the image of the country negatively. The paper therefore recommended that the Federal Government should look internally before trying to launder Nigerian's image abroad.*

### **Introduction: Problem Statement**

The year 2011, though eventful in many respects ended with a serious battering of Nigeria's external image with the following unfavourable but significant incidents. There was a religious uprising in Bauchi State, that officially claimed not fewer than 70 lives, there was also the failed attempt to bomb and kill about 300 innocent passengers aboard the Delta Airlines at the Detroit Airport, USA by an over pampered Nigerian religious fanatic and extremist, Umar Farouk Abdulmullab, and another failed attempt to bomb a television station by another misguided miscreant and fundamentalist in Lagos. (The Pointer Editorial, 2010).

Quite recently some religious fundamentalist who call themselves Boko Haram (Western Education is a sin) have bombed the Police Headquarters in Abuja and even the United Nations house also in Abuja. As if these were not bad enough, they struck again at the police headquarters in Yola. As at the last count, the death toll was about 350. In all these and many such incidents, innocent Nigerians and foreigners have lost their lives. Apart from these, there are also the activities of the militants in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria which the Amnesty programme has to a large extent reduced. The effect of these incidents on Nigeria's image internationally is no doubt devastating.

These incidents put together can be regarded as terrorist activities carried out by people who can be regarded as militants. The aphorism "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" underscores how the use of the label terrorism can be highly subjective depending on one's sympathies. Militants in the Niger Delta have continued to maintain that they are freedom fighters, while government and their critics believe that they are criminals who terrorise people and carry out terrorist activities.

The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1994) defined a militant as one who is engaged in fighting, aggressively in support of a cause, while a terror is a person who is a dreadful nuisance. Terrorism according to it, is the policy of using acts inspiring terror as a method of ruling or conducting political opposition, while a terrorist is a person who favour or practice terrorism. From the above definitions, it can be concluded that terrorists, militants or whatever name they are called carry out similar activities.

These activities include murder, hostage taking, kidnapping, bombing, and arson, blowing up of oil installations, violence, creating tension and fear and so on. There is no doubt that these are some of the activities that can be associated with the militants in the Niger Delta. Although the activities of militants started long ago, there has been an upsurge since 2006 with other associated criminal activities such as oil bunkering, pipeline vandalisation, gun running and so on. Oil and Gas prospecting, producing and marketing companies owned by foreigners have been the main targets of these militants who are believed to have powerful sponsors. Resistance and Militancy have always co-existed with occupation and repression in the region. Before the massacres in Umuechem, Ogoniland, Choba, Ochiesma etc. there have been other massacres at Akwette on the bank of the Imo River, Kebo, Akassa, Ebrohimi and Benin River.

This situation has led to destruction of properties, loss of lives, insecurity of lives and properties with the attendant consequences of divestment and mass exodus of foreigners. How have these activities affected the Nigerian economy, how have they affected foreign investments, and more importantly how has the international image of the country been affected. These and many other questions need answering.

The objectives of this paper therefore include the following:

- To determine the present international image of Nigeria.
- To find out whether the activities of militants in the Niger Delta and other parts of the country have affected Nigeria's image abroad.
- To examine the factors responsible for the activities of the militants.
- To ascertain whether the country's government has been making concerted efforts to address the issue of Nigeria's image abroad.
- To make recommendations on how to correct and improve on the image of Nigeria abroad.

### **Methodology**

The paper was basically based on library research. All the data obtained were got through the secondary source which includes going through the internet journals, magazines, newspapers and so on. Informal discussions were also had with Dr. Chris Ekiyor, the immediate past President of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). Although not quoted as request, some of the relevant information obtained were incorporated into the work. Data obtained from these sources form the basis of the findings of this study.

### **Literature Review**

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Cable News Network (CNN) in mid 2006, did separate reports profiling Nigeria and Nigerians as almost synonymous with fraud - a stereotype that was at best a mild restatement of the world wide perception. In 2005, a year earlier a more damaging report circulated by the United State Department of the country of State predicted the balkanization of Nigeria by the year 2015, about three years from now. The report stated clearly that Nigeria is now a failed state, exemplified in the near collapse of government, seething poverty, mass apathy, widespread corruption in government circles and rise in ethnic conflict as is presently experienced in the Niger Delta and parts of the North.

The report concluded that the Al-Qaeda and other terror networks find easy recruits and religion extremism will reach fever level in such failed states, out of deep seated frustration and distrust of government to deliver target goals, the report concluded. (Kanu, Ajakaye, Oboh and Jegede, 2009). The Obasanjo led government in power then as expected deftly countered it, but independent analysts believed it was based on certain realities about the Nigerian society; worsening poverty and issue of Sharia in the North, the raging insurgency in the Niger Delta, and echoes of session allowing several Yoruba movements of the South-West and separatist campaigns of the Movement of the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), in the South East.

Apart from the activities of these groups revelations about barefaced stealing of unbelievable amounts of public funds and arrest of prominent Nigerians abroad on charges of money laundering made matters worse. In addition the lopsided running of democracy and intra-party squabbles that drew international headlines, plus rising incidences of kidnapping, armed robbery, and drug trafficking have added to the negative image of the country and how Nigerians are viewed abroad.

More embarrassing is the alarm raised by the former Nigerian ambassador to China, Aminu Wali that 90 percent of crimes committed by Africans in that country are by Nigerians. Immigration authorities have also confirmed that most Nigerians now present passports of foreign nations to gain entry into their destinations - an indication that the hitherto respected Green Passport is fast becoming a burden to the owners.

All these put together and the continuous activities of militants in the Niger Delta despite the so called Amnesty and post Amnesty programmes are increasing and adding to the vices with which Nigerians would now be viewed all over the world, thereby casting them in even worse light and potentially blocking their inroads in host countries seeking all means to weed them out on slight excuses.

The issue of the Niger Delta as a result of the discovery of oil and oil wealth is central to the history of modern industrial capitalism. But in Nigeria, as else where, the discovery of oil, and oil revenues of about \$40 billion currently, has ushered in a miserable, undisciplined, decrepit, and corrupt form of petro-capitalism.

After a half century of oil production from which almost \$300 billion in oil have flowed directly into the Federal Treasury (and perhaps \$ 50 billion promptly flowed out only to disappear overseas) Nigeria per capital income stands at \$290 per year. For majority of Nigerians, living standards are no better now than at independence in 1960.

Paradoxically, oil producing states in the federation have benefited the least from oil wealth. Devastated by the ecological cost of oil spillage and the highest gas flaring rates in the world, the Niger Delta is a political hot spot. A generation of militant restive' youth, deep political frustrations among oil producing communities and pre-electoral thuggery all combined to prosper in the rich soil of political marginalization. Even with the growth of oil-revenue to the Niger Delta States - now standing at 13 per cent - the region remains desperately poor, and it is the deepening material and political grievances that stem from the region's exclusion that place the Niger Delta at the confluence of the four most pressing political issues in the federation namely; resource control, struggle for self determination of minority people, crisis of rule in the region and the emergence of what is called a South South Alliance.

For the purpose of this paper the concepts militancy and terrorism shall be used interchangeably. Terrorism, according to Encarta (2008) is the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear for bringing about political change. All terrorist acts involve violence or-equally important, the threat of violence. Those violent acts are committed by non-governmental groups or individuals that is, by those who are neither part of non officially serving in the military forces, law enforcement agencies, intelligence services or either governmental agencies of an established nation state.

The activities of such groups more often than not affect security in the nation and subsequently affects economic activities and the economy of the nation generally. The activities of the militants in the Niger-Delta and other areas in the country can be classified into this.

Apart from affecting the production of oil which is the main source of revenue to the government it has also affected the security of lives and properties, especially as it affects foreign nationals. This in effect affects the international image of the country and portrays it has a place which is not safe for tourism and foreign investments.

Terrorism attempt not only to sow panic but also to undermine confidence to the government and political leadership of the target country. It is therefore designed to have psychological effects that reach beyond its impact on the immediate victims or object of an attack. Terrorism means to frighten and thereby intimidate a wider audience, such as a rival ethnic or religious group an entire country and its political leadership or the international community as a whole. For instance the activities of the militants in the Niger- and other parts of the country falls into this category and threatens the international community as a whole. The incident of Friday, January 8, 2010 in which rebels in Angola mercilessly shot sporadically into the bus carrying the football team and officials of Togo to the Nations cup taking place in the country killing three people and injuring others is not only a national embarrassment but a threat to international peace and security. (NTA Network News, 2010). The recent bombing of the UN house in Abuja earlier referred to also falls into this category.

The activities of militants have occurred throughout history for a variety of reasons. These could be historical, cultural, political, social, psychological, economic, or religious or any combination of these. In general, democratic countries have provided more fertile ground for militancy because of the often nature of their societies. This is because in such societies citizens have fundamental rights, civil liberties are legally protected, and government control and constant surveillance of its citizens and their activities is absent on the other hand, in repressive societies, in which government closely monitors citizens and restrict their speech and movement, such societies often provided more difficult environment for militancy.

Militant attacks are characterised by certain factors which include planning and organization. In other words, their actions are never random by or senselessly carried out. Instead, they want them to attract maximum publicity because media attention helps achieve the intimidation needed for their success. Their actions are therefore properly and carefully planned. Their targets are usually innocent civilians in order to create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and insecurity. Some militants sometimes deliberately direct their attacks against large numbers of ordinary citizens who simply happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The recent attacks by the Boko Haram group is a very good example of such attacks.

Militants employ different weapons to carryout their activities depending on the country, situation place or circumstance. One of the commonest of these weapons is firearms, which include automatic weapons such as assault rifles, sub machine guns, and pistols: sawn-off shotguns; hunting rifles with snipers sights, especially for assassination; and machine guns. Some even use rocket propelled grenades and other armor piercing projectiles in their attacks and even bazookas. Hand made grenade or its home made equivalents are also used. Some militants might go as far as using bombs, chemical and biological weapons, depending on the level of sophistication and the country where they operate.

### **Findings**

To properly discuss the findings of this paper, it is important to restate the objectives earlier stated. These include:

- To determine the present international image of Nigeria
- To find out whether the activities of militants in the Niger Delta and other parts of the country have affected Nigeria's image abroad
- To examine the factors responsible for the activities of the militants
- To ascertain whether the country's government has been making concerted efforts to address the issue of Nigeria's image abroad.
- To make recommendations on how to correct and improve on the image of Nigeria abroad.

Although, most militant groups have failed to achieve their long-term, strategic objectives through militancy, militancy has however been able to bring about significant political changes that might

otherwise have been impossible. Moreover, despite the claims of governments to the country, militancy has sometimes also proven successful on a short-term tactical level: winning the release of prisoners, wresting political concessions from otherwise resistant government or ensuring that causes and grievances that might have been ignored or neglected were addressed.

Take the issue of the activities of militants in the Niger Delta for instance. It has brought the problem of the Niger Delta to the front burner and there is hardly a day in the past four years that the issue is not discussed in the media. The issue of resource control has also become very prominent in national discuss. It is the activities of the militants that has again brought about the issue of the review of the revenue allocation formula which is now before the national assembly. They have also been able to source the unconditional release of Henry Okah, the leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Although he is now undergoing trail in South Africa, it is on an allegation of terrorism. Some indigenes of the Ijaw Nation, notably President, Goodluck Jonathan have also been appointed to key political positions. Although the Boko Haram's demands have not been fully addressed it has force the Federal government to initiate trail of the policemen who allegedly killed their leader in police custody. There are now overtures to them to come to the negotiating table with the Federal Government. The logic of this decision is however debatable.

Despite these gains, the activities of these militants have seriously affected the international image of Nigeria. The kidnapping of foreign nationals and the blowing up of oil pipelines have attracted international attention. Also the bombing of the UN house attracted a lot of negative attention all over the world. This has led to some countries recalling their nationals working in the Niger Delta and other parts of the country. There is also the negative effect on foreign investments and tourism in the areas. It was the insecurity in the Niger Delta that forced FIFA not to accept Warri, in Delta State as a venue for the under 17 world cup tournament sometime ago.

From the foregoing, the present international image of Nigeria cannot be said to be on the favourable side. After the little relief gotten from the amnesty programme put in place by the federal government, the attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmullab to detonate a bomb in an aircraft and the unfortunate reckless and senseless killings by the Boko Haram fanatics again destroyed the little that is left of the battered image of the country. As a matter of fact, the United States had earlier reacted by placing the name of Nigeria on the terror watch list. This means that Nigerians travelling all over the world are now subjected to all kinds of ridiculous search and humiliation. This is certainly a minus for the Nigeria's image project.

As has been earlier stated there is no doubt that the activities of militants, terrorists, fundamentalists, religious fanatics, or whatever name they are called are seriously affecting the country's international image. Apart from the misadventure of Abdulmullab there have been religious uprisings in Bauchi which claimed about 70 lives and another attempt to bomb a television station in Lagos. There are also the insecurity in Jos and other parts of the world. More worrisome is the fact that the amnesty programme put together for the militants in the Niger Delta is becoming a conduit pipe for money to be spent on some people that do not deserve it. The programme itself can be said to be resting on a pillar of sand and can collapse at any time.

On Saturday, December 19, 2009, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) according to Emmanuel (2009) deemed it destroyed a major crude pipeline belonging to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Limited (CNL) respectively in Abonema, Rivers State. The report said further that MEND in an e-mail statement explained that the "warning strike" was carried out by 35 men on a boat with assault rifles, rocket launchers and heavy calibre machine guns. Since then although there has been relative peace in the area, the hoodlums can strike at any time. This is just one of several such attacks carried out by militants after the amnesty was granted. This to a large extent shows that what exists in the Niger Delta is just a fragile peace.

The problem of the Niger Delta is a direct result of the marginalization of the area which produces oil that is the major revenue source of the Nigerian economy. Since oil was discovered in Oloribi in Bayelsa State in the late 60s it has been a sad story of discrimination, neglect, marginalization and impoverisation of the area. The area is under developed and people still drink water from the creeks. This is what has led to the agitation for resource reallocation which has now developed to a full scale violent struggle by the militants and this has seriously affected the international image of Nigeria. Apart from this there have been agitation from other groups including the recent one from Boko Haram. All these are sources of battering of the image of the country.

Due to the negative media reports about Nigeria abroad, successive governments have been carrying out aggressive Public Relations campaigns on line. Information Minister then, Chukwuemeka Chikelu, and later his successor, Frank Nweke, who crisscrossed the world with his Heart of Africa (HOA) project, had their own pet image projects. Neither appears to have changed the image so much. Former Minister of Information and Communication, Professor Dora Akunyili also launched the Rebranding Nigeria project. This like other ones before it has not really achieved the desired result. The present Minister has not come out to say whether he is continuing with the programme or coming out with a new one. The truth is that Nigeria's image abroad as at now is not much to be proud of.

Apart from these image projects the Federal government has made several promises aimed at pacifying the restive Niger Delta. These include promises to review the revenue allocation formula. The amnesty granted to militants and the post amnesty project are steps in this direction. For instance, a Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs has been created with a Minister and Minister of State appointment to pilot the affairs of the Ministry. This is ostensibly to facilitate development in the area. The government also approved a whopping N22 billion as post- amnesty funds to resettle the militants that were granted amnesty and develop the area. All these have not stopped the problem. Boko Haram who may be wanting their own share of the nation cake have also joined in the struggle and there is no guarantee that other groups will not join.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There is no doubt that Nigeria's image is not positive internationally. The activities of militants, the recent embarrassing rate of kidnapping, and armed robbery and other activities by hoodlums have gone a long way to paint the country to the outside world in negative light. This has made most of the efforts made in rebranding Nigeria a big waste. It is therefore recommended that we should look inwards and do a lot of internal rebranding before reaching out to the outside world. Employment should be provided for the youths, social amenities and infrastructures should be made available, there should be free and fair elections and our political leaders should realize leadership is not all about stealing but service. This is the only way the country can made progress and the country's image improved.

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