

Proliferation of Light Weapons and Small Arms in West Africa: A Case Study of the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract: This research examined the impact of light weapons and small arms in Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the West African sub region in general and Niger Delta area of Nigeria in particular has enrolled among the wide issues that have attracted scholarship debate in the contemporary peaceful co-existence in this sub-region. The economic development and the proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta have been captured in this work. So many factors like the impact of environmental degradation and poor health services on Niger Delta indigenes; unemployment and illiteracy as the socio economic context of the proliferation of arms in the region and the lack of basic infrastructures such as the socio-economic context of the smuggling and illegal possession of weapons in the Niger Delta has also been justified. To ameliorate the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, amnesty programs in the region by government must be sustained. They should create jobs for the youths in the region and regulate the oil companies operating in the region, so that they can shun direct and indirect human right abuses in alliance with the states in the Niger Delta.

Key words: Light weapons • Small arms • Niger delta • Unemployment and Illiteracy

INTRODUCTION

The availability and proliferation of light weapons and small arms pose the greatest danger to peace and securities of the West African sub-region in general and the Niger Delta of Nigeria in particular. These weapons have helped to prolong conflicts, undermined stability, social peace, security and brought devastation on the economies of affected states in the West African sub region [1, 2, 3, 4 and 5].

[1], quoted United Nations General Assembly 1997, in the report of Government Experts on small arms as saying that light weapons are heavy machine guns. Small arms are also defined in the forgoing report as revolvers and self leading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles and sub-machine guns. Light weapons and small arms do not include crude implements such as machetes, knives and clubs, etc, which have been commonly used at wars in traditional settings [6, 7, 8, 9 and 10].

Proliferation supply denotes multiplication or increase in the possession. Integrated regional information Networks (IRIN) (2011), notes that even through the economic community of West African States

(ECOWAS) declared a moratorium on the manufacture, import and export of light weapons and small arms in 1988, even though Nigeria set up a special communities with numbers drawn from the armed forces, security agencies and law makers to coordinate effort to mop up light weapons and small arms in the country, even though more than 8,000 light weapons and small arms recovered following ECOWAS moratorium were destroyed in July, 2001, even though large numbers have subsequently been reclaimed, with two militia groups in the Niger Delta, surrendering more than 3,500 guns in 2004, the influx of light weapons and small arms in West Africa in general and in the Niger Delta of Nigeria in particular has continued to be on the hike. Some scholars said that Nigeria's problem with light weapons and small arms especially in Niger Delta dates back to country's 1967-1970 civil wars, during which the South East made a failed attempt to secede. It was obvious that many of the small arms used in that war, especially on the rebel Biafran side, were not mopped up at the end of hostilities. The war, however, created a generation of people who had trained in the use of weapons but were not under the disciplines and control of any of the armed forces. The main focus of

this research work however is to analyze how lack of economic development in the Niger Delta leads to the proliferation or increased acquisition of light weapons and small arms in the area. The study also seeks to explain how the proliferation of light weapons and small arms lead to increased armed violence and insecurity in the Niger delta and to make recommendation on how to curb the increase or proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta [11, 12, 13 and 14].

Objectives of the Study: A lot of factors have underpinned the proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta. One of them is lack of economic development of the oil region. In spite of the obvious reason that the Niger Delta produces the wealth of the nation, the environmental hazards have not been abated by the federal government. These problems have triggered off the proliferation of light weapons and small arms and consequent armed violence in the Niger Delta area. The study seeks to achieve the following objectives to find out how lack of economic development in the Niger Delta leads to the increase acquisition or proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the area. To find out how the proliferation of light weapons and small arms lead to the increased arm violence and insecurity in the Niger Delta. To recommend ways of alleviating and curbing the multiplication of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta and the overall improvement of economic development of the area.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Method of Data Collection: Data for this research has been based mainly on secondary sources. Booth, *et al*, (2008), [15], opines those secondary sources are information that have been gathered by researchers and recorded in books, articles and other publication. Secondary sources are also research reports that use primary data to solve research problems, written for scholarly and professional audience. [5], sees a secondary source, as a report on the finding of the primary sources, remarks that even though the secondary sources often provide a broader background and readily improves one's learning curve. However, these agree that a secondary source of data is neither better nor worse than primary data, it is simply different. It should be further noted that the source of data is not as important as its quality. This, however, does not mean that secondary source of data collection is better than primary source but the reason why this study has decided to adopt secondary source of

data collection is because of the nature of phenomena under study. Secondary source of data saves the time of the researcher since it has to do with data collected by someone other than the user. It is also pertinent to note that in secondary data, much of the background work needed has already been carried out for example, literature review and case studies might have been carried out published texts and statistics could have been already used elsewhere, media production and personal contents have also been utilized already. The strength of secondary data generally lies on its pre-established degree of validity and reliability which need not to be re-examined by the researcher who is re-using such data. In the case of our study on the proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta, it may be very different to approach a militant or someone who is in possession of arms to open up in interview or in response to questionnaire and disclose his mode of operation to an outlandish researcher who needs first-hand information from him. These are the reason why this research has decided to rely on data already obtained by others in the course of their study.

Method of Data Analysis: In other to analyze the data collected from the above sources, content analysis will be used. Content analysis or textual analysis is a methodology in the social sciences for studying the content of communication. Content analysis can also be based on the knowledge of everyday experiences. The advantages of content analysis as a method of data analysis lies on its use in making inference about the antecedents of communication, the characteristics of communications and the consequences of communications. Content analysis looks directly at communication via text or transcripts and hence gets at the central aspect of social interaction. It can allow for both quantitative and qualitative operations content analysis can also provide valuable historical/cultural insight over time through analysis of texts. It can also be used to interpret system (since knowledge and rules can both be coded in terms of explicitly statement about the relationship among concepts).

Discussion: This research which is captioned "proliferation of light weapons and small Arms in West Africa: The case study of the Niger Delta" achieved three major objectives. These objectives are first, lack of economic development in the Niger Delta leads to the increased acquisition or proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the area [15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20].

Second, how the proliferation for light weapons and small arms lead to the increased armed violence insecurity in the Niger Delta and third recommend ways of alleviating and curbing the multiplication of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta and the overall improvement of economic development of the area [21, 22 and 23].

In the first objective of the research which derives from the first research question and hypothesis, this research established the fact that it is lack of economic development in the Niger delta that degenerated into the resort to small arms and light weapons proliferation in the area [24, 25, 26 and 27].

It had been observed in this research that prior to the discovery and consequent exploration of oil in the Niger Delta in the late 1950s and early 1960s; the Niger Delta region has been living predominantly on farming, fishing and hunting [28, 29 and 30].

This is because they were blessed with good arable land and fresh water. That period was also a period when agriculture was the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy. Therefore, the people of the Niger Delta region were living comfortably and their means of livelihood was not frustrated. Sequel to the discovery and exploration of oil in the Niger Delta and destruction or pollution of both land and water due to oil spills and fire outbreak which in most cases is a corollary of oil spills, the people's means of survival was battered and frustrated [31, 32, 33 and 34].

Government on their own side had been much interested in the royalty derived from the exploration of oil in the Niger Delta than paying attention to the provision of alternative means of livelihood to the region. This agitation by the people, in their perception, could not have been effected by light weapons as noted earlier in this study are heavy machine guns, hand held under barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti aircraft, guns, recoilless rifles and among others [35].

The small arms and light weapons have gotten into the hands of the Niger Delta militia groups through local manufacturers, politicians during election, men of the armed forces, smugglers, et cetera. These arms which have been indicated to be in wide circulation in Nigeria adjudged Niger Delta region to be in possession of 50% of the circulation illicit in Nigeria. In the second objective of this research, which proceeds from the second research question and hypothesis, establishment is also made that if there is proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta, it is likely that armed violence and insecurity would increase. Those militia groups in their effort to place their demands on the National agenda and

become popular beyond the shores of Nigeria have taken to a wide range of small arms and light weapons [36, 37, 38, 39 and 40]. These arms which are illegally possessed and smuggled into the Niger Delta region through local manufacturers, politician during election, men of the armed forces, arms smugglers, et cetera, have been used to advance militancy, killings, abduction, or kidnapping, oil pipeline vandalization, bunkering, armed robbery, et cetera.

The Niger Delta region and the federal government have been in constant struggle over the disruption of oil exploration by the Niger Delta militia groups and the marginalization and exploration of the Niger Delta region by the federal government. The federal government in most cases has used force to advance their oil policies in Niger Delta region instead of dialogue and paying attention to the basic needs of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta. The persistent deployment of the federal troops to match force with force by the federal government, in the Niger Delta region ended up exacerbating the oil crisis in the area. Many lives since the inception of the oil crisis have been lost. The lives of both men of the armed forces and civilians alike have not been spared in the crisis. The use of force by the federal government to the force of the militants in the Niger Delta only presented a façade of the achievement of intermittent peace in the Niger Delta region. However, no sooner did the late president Yar'Adua assumed office as the president of the federal Republic of Nigeria than he initiated what may be seen as a lasting solution to the Niger Delta Crises. The Amnesty Programme was perceived as a success because it saw over 20,000 Niger Delta inhabitants including their leaders dropping their arms within 60 days deadline of the programme [2].

However, the debate that has ensued from the Amnesty programme is whether it will be sustained by the federal government under the presidency of President Goodluck Jonathan. Agekameh (2011: 23), noted that the president has proved faithful to the post Amnesty Programme following his award of 3,112 contracts In August, 2010 through the Niger Delta Development commission (NDDC) following Agekameh's Explanation 1,412 out of the 3,112 contracts have be commissioned for use in the Niger Delta region. To supplement infrastructural development in the Niger Delta, human capital development was also initiated in which the former militants were taken to rehabilitation camp in Obubra, Cross River state, to imbibe the principle of non-violence. They were consequently placed in vocational/skill acquisition centers and institutions within and outside the country. And at the time of this report, October, 1st, 2010,

the sixth Batch comprising 1,200 ex-militants from Delta and Edo states arrived Obubra camp to commence training [3]. As at October 4,2010, the presidential Amnesty office has plead 2,185 ex-militants who passed through the Obubra camp in 49 training centers within Nigeria while arrangements have been concluded to send 529 trainees to institutions and centers outside the country [3]. Their placement was based on their expressed interest in areas such as pipeline welding, underwater welding, ocean driving, crane operations oil drilling, automobile technology, fish farming and entrepreneurship [41, 42, 43, 44 and 45].

The duration of the vocation training for each of the trainees is expected to span between 6 months and two years. A number of ex-militants who have shown preference for formal education have also been recommended to undertake courses in schools in the country and offshore. Amidst the success achieved by the Amnesty programme in training Niger Delta ex-militants is a concealed issue agitating the minds of so many analysts. This raises an important question of the Amnesty programme which is the integration of the ex-militants into the labour-force. Some of the youths in Niger Delta who have completed their training but are not doing anything have demonstrated their readiness to establish their own workshops and offices if they can muster sufficient financial support to set it up [46, 47, 48, 49 and 50]. This raises the question of whether the Amnesty Programme will be sustained. If the ex-militants cannot be absorbed into labour force and enough fund provided for their private establishments they will in the long-run go back to militancy in a more sophisticated way following their knowledge of pipeline welding, under water welding, ocean driving, among others [4].

Another side of the Amnesty programme is the mind boggling question scholars raise concerning the programme. For example, when and where can we draw a line between militancy and criminality? This has become necessary because no one can rule out the future possibility of a few rag tag individuals invading the creeks in the name of Niger Delta agitation and starting to ask for another amnesty. Other questions are: what are the incentives to other young people who have not yet taken to militancy but who are also unemployed, desperate and vulnerable? When will government make a statement that amnesty cannot be a cover for criminality lawlessness? Is Nigerian state not encouraging the use of violence to register any form of discontent [5]? These questions, however, cannot rule out the wisdom showcased by the late president Yar'adua in initiation of amnesty programme [51, 52 and 53].

Finally, I still wonder what would have been better than the amnesty in the Niger Delta. Igwe, (2011) asserts that the amnesty programme succeeded in mopping up from the region many arms, thus reducing drastically the proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the Niger Delta region. The amnesty programme no matter any criticism should be applauded for championing the course of peace in the Niger Delta which other polices of the federal government has hitherto failed to champion. If the federal government of Nigeria should keep faith to their agreement of the development of both human and material capital in the Niger Delta region, then the Amnesty programme would have been adjudged as a permanent solution to the proliferation of light weapon and small arms in the Niger Delta region by not keeping faith to their agreement with the people, then the people will go back to the agitation of their resources right in which case, they will embark on militancy and continued proliferation of light weapons and small arms in the region.

Recommendations: Government should as a matter of national interest intensify its effort in sustaining the Amnesty programme in the Niger Delta. Since steps such as the orientation of the militant to non-violent behavior and giving them vocational/skill acquisition training have been taken, effort should now be put more on creating jobs where these trainees will be employed. Government should also make fund available for the trainees who want to engage in entrepreneurial activities to be able to set up their own enterprises. Government should be accountable to the people in the use of public resources. The efforts and polices of the government should be geared towards poverty alleviation and the improvement of the standard of living of the entire citizens of Nigeria. Government ought to, as a matter of responsibility improve its investment on infrastructural development, free and equality education to avert illiteracy, improve on industrialization, among other things, in order to keep its teeming youths busy and to prelude the rise of dissent groups who are capable of frustrating the programme of the government. Political leaders should embrace virtues and uphold the principle that sovereignty resides with the people. To this end, politicians should avoid distributing arms to the people to assist them secure political officers with the use of force and be committed to free and fair election realizing that their actions bode well or ill for their country and for the respect and dignity for its people. The oil companies must shun direct and indirect human rights abuses in alliance with the state, for instance, by importation of small arms and light weapons into the

country and Niger Delta region. They should take their voluntary codes and internationally accepted standards of behaviour seriously and implement same through vigorous training of their management and filled staff. It is important that the oil companies operate in the Niger Delta region adopt deliberate in. Government should challenge the international community, especially arms exporting states on their obligation towards the victims of small arms beyond their obligation towards the victims of small arms and light weapons beyond their borders and insst that such obligation are not merely moral. One of the ways this can be done is by ensuring that the export and transit of weapons from their territory are highly controlled by legal licensing that gives due regards and a certain level of respect for international law in the country. The federal government should embark on serious security sector reform initiative in which government should partner with the armed forces and the civil society. This will help checkmate the illegal transfer of arms from corrupt men of the armed forces to insurgent civilians. Corrupt officers who are bent on giving out their arms for money should be finish out and sanctioned accordingly. Government should shun corruption function of protecting lives and properties of its citizens, by holding oil companies rights and environmental protection of international human rights and environment protection laws. The issue of gas flaring oil spills among others has to be accountably and duly compensated in accordance with the stipulated international guidelines. Government and the oil companies must fashion out ways of ensuring the participation of the region, especially the youth in the industry. This will give the region a sense of belonging and protection of the work which is now their source of live hood. More case studies on conflict dynamics and patterns of arms flow should be conducted by government in Nigeria. This will go a long way in providing quick solution to ensuring conflicts in Nigeria and avert indiscriminate illegal arms flow in the country. The practical step towards addressing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in a stakeholders forum should be considered by the government. This will enhance the assessment, update and sharing of knowledgebase information on small arms and light weapons from different strata for the society.

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