

THE NIGER DELTA: A VISION TO NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT

Being a Paper presented

By

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Introduction

Let me at the outset express my sincere thanks to the organizers of this conference for considering me worthy of participation in this assemblage of molders of the nation's public opinion. I am equally gratefully impressed by the caliber of those with whom I am sharing the podium, men and women playing key roles in developing or providing the basis of engagement on some of the key issues that will shape the subject of the theme of this conference. That indeed underscores the seriousness of this conference.

I think that this conference is being held at a most auspicious time when chaos in present energy and financial markets is quite momentous and getting worse by the day with their attendant risk of destroying the national economy. Indeed we now have a volatile market for oil, and perhaps worse for gas and all these are happening at a period of a global economic meltdown. Discussions on a theme that anchors on our nation's quest to assume our deserved place in the competitive environment of global economic development cannot be at a better time.

In the invitation extended to me I was asked to speak on the topic-“**Niger Delta Insurgency: A Threat or Challenge To Vision 2020**”. Let me confess from the outset my considerable difficulties with the assigned topic. First, is the issue of -“**Niger Delta Insurgency**”. Whilst I may not claim any special expertise in use of English words, especially in a gathering of editors, I do firmly believe that it does serious violence to my understanding or conception of insurgency(which in my view connotes rebellion) to proceed from the premise that there is an insurgency in the Niger delta. Whilst there is undoubtedly a crisis in the Niger delta, it is not an insurgency. This point is important not only for an understanding of the point(s) I intend to make in this discussion but also so as not to reinforce our nation’s ready penchant for easy peripheral geographical categorization of crisis. A crisis in the North is readily categorized as “*religious*”, if in the middle belt the ready label is “*communal*” whilst the brand name in the Niger delta is becoming “*militancy*”. What this type of ready generic categorization robs us and other interested observers of is the proper appreciation of the real problem and its triggers. The truth is that in most of these crises, there are two underlying issues that are lost because of the impatient wholesale categorization- the cries for justice and the manifestation of bare criminality. I would insist that both in its conception and manifestation there is nothing yet to justify the elevation of the crisis in the Niger Delta to the status of insurgency.

The second issue for clarification to help put the issue under discussion in proper perspective is that,as I have repeatedly stressed, that although located in the region, the crisis in the Niger delta is not and should not be seen as a

Niger delta problem. It is indeed a Nigerian problem which although located in the Niger Delta region, has even profound international implications. A man who has a wound on his leg will be misstating his health position by claiming it is the leg's problem. A country like ours that have a problem at the region that provides over 90% of its economic livewire, is akin to a person with a heart problem. Any person who has a high percentage of his health problems in his heart will be doing himself grave and fatal injustice by localizing his categorization of his health problems. Our economic development expectancy, which is what my understanding of VISION 2020 is , would therefore depend on a proper diagnosis of our economic health challenges and its ultimate prescription. I also believe that others would mirror our economic health or the confidence to deal with us on their 'vision' of how they feel we are able to deal with our said health problems.

It is therefore for these reasons that I have chosen to speak on the topic-“**The Niger Delta: A vision for Nigeria's Economic Development**”. In dealing with this, I intend to briefly attempt an explanation of the nature, dynamics including some common fallacies of the Niger delta crisis and then hazard how those could be turned around to achieve our national development vision. For me the vision through which we and the world would and should see our development is the Niger delta which is presently our economic heartbeat.

The Niger Delta Crisis

Like other parts of the country, the peoples of the Niger Delta have been involved in a struggle for better deal from what became the Nigerian state

long before the country became independent. The struggle, which ultimately led to the setting up of the Willink's Commission, was largely peaceful, comprising mainly in protests, delegations and Parliamentary contributions by their representatives. The main case that was presented by the peoples was mainly on the issue of underdevelopment and need for decentralization of powers to the peoples of the region.

Thus the fundamental problem of the Niger delta was and still remains the challenge posed by the very harsh environment which made development most challenging and in the situation that successive governments at the centre hardly appreciate or show accommodation for this peculiarity has resulted in the criminal developmental neglect of the region.

While the region was still grappling with this crisis, oil was discovered in commercial quantity in the same Niger delta region. Oil as we should know, apart from its commonly expressed associated problems of pollution, environmental degradation, slows down development and impedes democracy. When a government is significantly dependent on oil, it hinders the development of representative politics by removing the need to collect taxes effectively. Without paying taxes, people's stake in society is reduced and their desire to see their money spent on providing the services they need is diminished. In this way, the governments of oil-dependent developing countries become less accountable to their people, even though they may have been chosen through elections. Studies have also established a correlation between oil and conflict as well as increased military spending. Our experiences today show that our Niger delta region and indeed Nigeria

is afflicted by these oil related problems to the extent that they have assumed a crisis proportion.

The point being stressed here is that the presence of this oil related crisis in the Niger delta and although the delta plays host to almost all of Nigeria's oil that does not therefore transform the fundamental problems of the area earlier highlighted into a sole problem of oil exploitation associated issues. Efforts at addressing the problems of the area have therefore suffered from the initial problem of treating clearly two separate though related issues as a single issue. The situation is akin to treating someone who malaria complicated by typhoid with only Fansidar or worse still, *my pikin!*

Because of the improper diagnose and treatment of this clearly separate though compounded crisis, it has become infected and mutated into a more serious crisis. Successive responses to these crises not only lacked commitment and credibility but were generally believed to be outright deceptive.

Economic as well as political factors have further conspired to exacerbate the problem. Several years of government embargo on employment, the shameful policy of casualisation of labour by oil companies, discrimination against Niger delta youths, employment of foreigners for jobs Nigerians can do, patronage syndrome, amongst others, have all contributed to erect a regime of massive youth unemployment. Neglected by the government, pressured by demands of subsistence and expectations from family and community, some fringe of youths some of whom, it has to be restated, are university graduates, have been attracted to illegitimate ways of fending for

themselves- sometimes through participation in oil theft (euphemistically called 'bunkering') and other vices. The huge amount of money accruing from bunkering and pay-offs by governments and operating companies act as a disincentive to genuine employment in some cases. These make for ready availability of an army of youths for potential recruitment into militia groups or as political thugs.

There is thus an overwhelming community feeling of anger that irreplaceable revenue from resources of their land are exploited and used for the development of other areas whilst they live in pristine conditions. This creates the enabling excuse and environment for gangs and groups to exploit the popular grievance to embark on illegal exploitation of the resources for their private benefit or make direct alliances with outside interests seeking to do so.

The predictable response of government to the violence, by unleashing superior violence, is often justified publicly on the basis of threats to national security. This conceptualisation of national security is not only faulty but fictitious because by relying on the militarist approach to the neglect of the social approach creates a paradoxical situation where national security becomes a threat to its nationals which in turn produces a burning sense of injustice.

Thus actions by militants, even when obviously self-centred and criminally motivated receive some community sympathy not out rightly out of ignorance but more of perception that they have a common enemy in the government-oil company alliance and they see the militants as standing up to

their oppressors and also because of a sense of powerlessness especially the unholy compromises between both the government/company agents and the militants.

This crisis has fed into and became exploited by the resort by some unscrupulous politicians to create their unofficial army of thugs which self-reinforces a situation by which some young men and women with cultist backgrounds infiltrated into positions of responsibility in government thereby becoming role models for younger and would-be cultists.

Throughout the last eight years, the political attitude in Abuja has been predominantly geared to maintain the status quo with as few concessions as possible. Payments to armed groups to prevent them from fomenting trouble appear to be an ongoing phenomenon which all but guarantees continuing conflict.

Oil companies also joined the fray in policies and practices that encouraged the growth of militancy. Their own approach over the past years has been to roll from one ad hoc approach to another while at all times dressing up this approach in the garb of a corporate social responsible strategy. A raft of back-door approaches have included 'stay-at-home' payments to youths, corruption and outright recruitment of gangs to provide security for oil operations became the order of the day. If there has been any area of success on their part, it has been greater effectiveness in keeping their own more dubious activities away from the public spotlight. These, combined with the result of government and oil company attention and responses which favours violent actions, created the graduating scale of violence in the delta. With a

pervasive regime of poverty, an increasing army of unemployed youths, a ready pool of recruitable youths for political thuggery, the natural result was militancy which has found expression in all sorts of violence including kidnapping.

The above constitute the crisis but the challenge on our hands now is that of redirecting and refocusing the Niger delta struggle free from the obvious pervasive climate of criminality. This will be a most challenging task considering the fact that there are many benefiting from the present situation. The most obvious benefactors are an array of security interests who are able to demand additional resources, contracts, equipment, and payments that are among the least likely in Nigeria to be tested to any level of transparency. Those involved include: the military forces, Police, State Security Services (SSS), international private security firms, expatriate workers whose allowances had tripled, international insurance companies, military hardware contractors, state governments' ('security budgets'), government and oil company operatives, and even local governments who will not hesitate to lean on 'security' to justify extra expenditure.

Local warlords who control bunkering routes and those associated with ransom payments also eke out significant benefits. So profound has this been that it has not only become an economic empire but has become self-perpetrating to the extent that I am afraid to say that, sadly, just like armed robbery, kidnapping has come to stay. This is because it has even grown to be used as a frightening tool in the resolution of family, business, political disagreements.

The cost of our inability to get the Niger delta right has been frightening. Thisday Newspaper of 1st April (two days ago) reported the Inspector General of Police to have said that between 2006 and 2008, kidnappers and hostage takers pocketed ransoms of over \$100m (about N15 billion). If you think that is an April fool story, then you need to take the Vanguard report of 27/3/09 quoting industry sources to say that about 680,000 bpd of oil is being lost to oil theft whilst about 1.3 million bpd have been shut in for the past six months. On the same day the Guardian reported that Nigeria lost about N105 billion since last November due to the shut down of the Soku gas plant in Rivers state. These figure are consistent with the much more detailed findings of the Niger Delta Technical Committee that I chaired, on the enormity of the economic and human loss occasioned by the crisis situation. For instance, that the value of oil revenue lost through spillages and bunkering between January and September 2008 was about \$20.7 billion.

The question is how can we achieve our economic development dreams, especially in a period of global recession, in the light of these losses? Take power, for instance, which is the cornerstone of any development agenda. What we donot get from the official figures and even the power probes, is that availability of gas for domestic use is a major challenge. Yet the official figure 22 billion cubic metres (bcm) which we flare annually is more than what Belgium and Luxemburg combined used in 2007 and equivalent to Brazil's entire natural gas consumption. Nigeria having committed most of its available gas for sale abroad for the next 5 years, Ogoni which has one of the highest gas deposits in the country could hold the key to our nation's power needs, yet the nation is in nohurry to get the issue resolved.

POSSIBLE REPOSES

In spite of these difficulties, the good news is that there is a general understanding of how damaging a full blown conflict could become and this can play a significant role in restraining militia action if there is a radical change in approach by government and oil companies.

However, it must be stressed from the outset that the degree of alienation of communities in the Niger delta and the fracturing of interests means that most incremental approaches to change or those which appear to be an extension of the status quo will fail – either because of inherent problems or because they will gain insufficient support to overcome sympathy for militant opposition to the status quo.

As we are all aware, I chaired the Niger Delta Technical Committee, , mandated to review past reports and initiatives on the Niger Delta and come up with some recommendations that are releveant to the present state of affairs.

The Committee has since the 1st of December 2008 presented its report to President Y’Adua. It’s a document that out of necessity encapsulates many interests but despite its limitations, it does have specific ideas that could be

further developed, implemented immediately or actively supported by all stakeholders.

Be that as it may, I believe that any credible starting point towards overcoming the nation's developmental vision must therefore necessarily respond to the fundamentals of the issue of development of the region. It is inconceivable that we can afford the luxury of thinking that we could have a development vision or could be seen to have one that does not start with addressing the issue of developing the Niger delta.

We must be able to distinguish between genuine community agitations and criminality and respond to them respectively as they are. Communities, qua communities, must be made to actually get the benefits of the non replaceable resources of their land. If the communities do not derive any benefits from the exploitation of the resources from their land, then they would obviously feel insecure, and their insecurity will invariably compromise the security of the resource exploitation. Where they can see some direct benefits from the exploitation, then they can protect their stake in the enterprise. If for example, the flow stations are made to supply electricity and water to the local communities , they would in turn have a stake in the continued operation of the station.

Also, the much needed interventions in infrastructure development and social amenities, as currently proposed have to take into account the track record of patronage contracting, inflation of contracts and the mismatch of centrally generated projects and community needs.

Furthermore, the issue of derivation itself must change significantly enough to bring about a genuine feel of ownership or a major stake in the industry for local communities – the need to achieve this without unduly damaging the interests of the rest of the country could be achieved by exploiting a progressive change which takes advantage of pending increases in oil production and/or the very significant gap between oil prices and budgeted receipts.

I would also forcefully argue that creating jobs for the teeming army of youths is a more serious way of dealing with the (oil) security challenge. Countries the world over have since realized that accumulation of youth unemployment is only a time bomb, sure to compromise societal security with devastating effect. Serious investments in social security especially targeted at youths are taken as national priority. If there are lessons to be learnt from the recent happenings in South Africa it is that subjecting youths to the same social conditions as we find presently in the Niger delta, is guaranteed to produce similar reactions. Nigeria is probably the only country of the world where there is the public deception called employment embargo.

Youth employment being canvassed here must be distinguished from the current tactics of appeasement targeting the most violent or militant segments of the youths which only serves to reinforce militancy and violence. Nothing demonstrates the stupidity of a federal government proposal to employ militants to guard the pipelines than a cartoon in one of the National newspapers some time ago where a suggestion to the announcement of the proposed policy was to the effect that armed robbers

should be employed to guard the Central Bank! That it was a defence Minister that was quoted to have unveiled the reported proposal shows the thin boundary between security personnel and insecurity personnel.

The bottom line in all these must be that the federal government must put its money where its mouth is. Commitments to solving the problems of the Niger delta must cross the threshold of a mantra or slogan to demonstrable reality. It would be an illusive vision to think we can be amongst the world's top 20 economies, in the nearest future without getting the Niger delta right. That should be our starting point.

ENDS/ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST ACTUAL DELIVERY