

MOSOP, others task UN on N'Delta demilitarisation

From Kelvin Ebiri (Port Harcourt) and Willie Etim (Yenagoa)

INDIGENOUS rights groups led by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) have urged the United Nations (UN) to prevail on the Nigerian government to demilitarise the Niger Delta.

The call was predicated on the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council which would today focus on Nigeria's record in Geneva, Switzerland.

Also, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), an umbrella body of all the youth in the region, has given militants in Bayelsa three months to close all the camps in the state.

MOSOP International Advocacy Officer, Legborsi Saro Pyagbara, in a statement made available to The Guardian, said several commitments which Nigeria had made to the international community including upholding all her obligations under the various international human rights instruments which the country has signed should be subjected to proper scrutiny.

He said representatives of nationality groups and non-governmental organisations from the Niger Delta attending the fourth session of the council, had called on the UN to put these commitments of Nigeria to test by calling on the Federal Government to end the militarisation with impunity in the Niger Delta.

A joint report endorsed by MOSOP, Stakeholder Democracy Network, Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Laws, Ijaw Youth Council, Itsekiri Leaders Forum, Movement For the Defence of Uvwie Nationality and the Council for the Liberation of Ikwerre People among others, has been presented to the United Nations council.

The groups alleged that the militarisation of the region had resulted in indiscriminate killing of innocent citizens, arbitrary arrests and rape of women, all which are in contravention of Nigeria's obligations under several human rights instruments including the international covenant on civil and political rights and the convention against torture.

Pyagbara urged the states attending the council meeting to take Nigeria to task on its treatment of minority and indigenous communities in the Niger Delta, where decades of gas flaring and unsustainable oil exploitation had imperilled the environment and destroyed natural livelihood support systems.

Pyagbara said: "At the centre of Nigeria's human rights crisis has been the treatment meted out to the mosaic of distinct minority and indigenous nationalities that straddle the length and breadth of the Niger Delta where the nation's exploration and exploitation of crude oil takes place."

He continued: "The Niger Delta Region, the epicenter of oil exploitation and exploration has a population of over 20 million comprising such people as the Ijaws, Ogonis, Itsekiris, Urhobos and Ogbas and has suffered monumental maltreatment through political and economic marginalisation, violence and environmental degradation."

He said the denial of basic rights and violence visited on Niger Delta communities worsened as oil became the dominant income earner for the country, accounting for almost 85 per cent of public revenue.

"With this ascendance of oil, the political elites of the majority tribes who control power at the federal level in complicity with the oil companies began the process of enacting dubious laws aimed at transferring the wealth of the Niger Delta to their territories whilst providing weak regulatory frameworks for the companies to operate," said Pyagbara.

The IYC observed that no one else, including the Federal Government could restore peace in the region except the indigenes and noted that the economic development of the region could not be achieved without peace.

The opening of militant camps has become such a lucrative business in Bayelsa that there is hardly any community in the state that does not have a camp where the militants operate from, and where they normally keep their captives hostage.

In a statement issued at the weekend following Friday's Ijaw Youth Summit held in Yenagoa to look for a way forward in resolving the Niger Delta crisis, the body called on the Bayelsa State government to take immediate steps towards dismantling all the militia camps in the state, adding that such more should be replicated in other parts of the region.

The statement, signed by the President of IYC, Dr. Chris Ekiyor and its Secretary, Mr. Udengs Eradiri, also called on the state government to provide for the demobilization, training and re-integration of those in such camps, stressing that such a programme must be holistic, and should accommodate all militia camps in the state.

The body noted that all militia camps must and should embrace the government-led demobilization and re-integration process and immediately start the process of closing down all militia camps within the next three months, saying youth restiveness had given the region a bad image.

The people of the state, the body declared, would regard any camp that remained open after this period as anti-people and anti-development, as it urged all communities in the state to cooperate with the state government in this regard.

The statement also called for the withdrawal of the military from the region, saying that the continued presence of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) in the region was unnecessary, claiming that any peace and security obtained solely by military means would not last, but rather, would cause the region to collapse into greater insecurity.

"The economies of the Niger Delta states are in near collapse due to the activities of armed groups and the money-making Joint Military Task Force in the region. This is creating greater hardship for our people and in some cases having a very devastating impact on our environment", it stated.

The body noted that the process of dismantling the militants was starting from Bayelsa State due to its homogenous nature, pointing out that the measure would be replicated in to other parts of the region.

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