

OGONI DAY 2011 STATEMENT BY LEDUM MITEE, MOSOP PRESIDENT

In every era, in every clime and for every oppressed people, God always in His infinite wisdom provide an opportunity for them to break the yoke of suppression and oppression. For us the Ogoni people, nay the Niger delta peoples, in our time, that opportunity was provided by the message represented by MOSOP, encapsulated in the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which burst into our consciousness to free us from the slave culture of silence and arouse in us the spirit of courage to stand up against political marginalization, economic strangulation and environmental racism.

Like all such messages, it was first derided, then violently repressed and ultimately accepted as the right message. Today, what started as an Ogoni initiative has grown into a metaphor for the struggle of the Niger delta and all oppressed peoples the world over.

The course of the struggle has been daunting, with huge sacrifices made, yet our cling to hope, our faith and abiding spirit of courage kept us steadfast and enabled us reap some important victories.

Not only have we proudly recovered our identity as a people but have also projected the Ogoni star so far in the firmament that today Ogoni is easily one of the best known ethnic groups in the world. Also, our enduring commitment to a struggle based on non violence has made us the recurrent reference point in any modern discourse about non violent grassroots mobilization. Whilst many, probably otherwise more powerful groups have failed, even with force of arms, we have become one of the few that has been able to send Shell out of our land. Today, as we brace ourselves for the critical battle of the challenges of a post-Shell Ogoni, our message is that the Ogoni people are not prepared to replace Shell with hell as we shall not accept any standards lower or like those we experienced with Shell, and the onus is on any would-be operator to demonstrably prove that they can deliver those best practices.

The successes we have recorded belong to all of us-all heroes and heroines of the struggle, who, for our better tomorrow, suffered yesterday and must be prepared to offer our best today. We may not have achieved all that we set out to achieve and certainly may not set out all we need to achieve but the fact that we have dared to set out and our unshakable commitment in this path ensure our ultimate success, even though there is much more to do.

Our success will no doubt be accelerated when we stand together without question on those core issues that drove us as a people to conceive the Ogoni Bill of Rights, even though we may disagree, sometimes vigorously, over tactics, engagements, personalities etc. As I have repeatedly stated, whether we are in or out of government, the permanent thing should be the Ogoni interest as we may be ex-this or ex-that but cannot be ex-Ogoni and it is to Ogoni that we would ultimately return when we are out of power. History will ultimately judge us and our struggle by what we could accomplish and not by whom it was accomplished.

One critical demand in our Bill of Rights is that for “***adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions***”. This year being an election year offers not only a remarkable opportunity for the Ogoni people to chart a path towards representation where the voice of our communities is clearly heard and their views properly represented but becomes a litmus test for the benefits envisaged by this demand. I enjoin all of you to actively participate in the coming voters’ registration exercise and urge you to use only competence and overall interest of our people as the main considerations for your choice of candidates.

Whilst we have had representation at the local, state and national levels of government over the years, can we say truly that our views have been adequately represented at the different layers of government? In the coming elections, I urge you to use your votes to send a clear and decisive message that gone are the days that some of our representatives hardly utter a word throughout their tenures. We should equally let it be known to the candidates that the Ogoni people have a voice which must be heard and respected and thus would not accept those who only tell us what they

want to do without asking what we want. If they do not know what we want they should ask and we shall inform them. For instance, a key demand of our people as captured in our Ogoni Bill of Rights is:

“That the Ogoni people demand to be granted POLITICAL AUTONOMY to participate in the affairs of the Republic as a distinct and separate unit by whatever name called”.

In accordance with this and the overwhelming wishes of our people, the constitutional processes for the actualization of the request for the creation of a Bori State has commenced and the next more crucial stages for the realization of this vision are now before the National Assembly. Those who aspire to the National Assembly must therefore pledge to our people what they would do to actualize this demand. The processes may be daunting but it is my belief that if we muster the same courage and resources, marshaled against the military for this Bori state venture, we certainly will succeed. There is hardly any mountain too high that a determined people cannot climb.

For the avoidance of any doubts, it is important for our Ogoni politicians to understand that we have no issue with any individual but in the struggle against political oppression, we must insist that all our would-be representatives demonstrate visible commitments to the welfare of our people. This will require those of us who are leading to come closer to those being led, and those being led to insist that we will not be led astray. This also means facing the people. In the past, candidates who have been confident of party power have been reluctant to face the people and explain their manifestos. We hope those days are past, as we call on the Ogoni people to reject any candidate who does not come home and explain comprehensively what he or she will do if elected to represent our people. Any Ogoni who for money sells his vote not only sells his/her future but offends against the spirits of Ogoni.

As we mark this Ogoni Day, I would not fail to remark that Ogoniland, the Niger delta and the nation are passing through a most challenging period. Inaction and at times reward for violent behavior has contributed to setting

the hands of our community, regional and national clock several decades back. Disagreements, whether in politics or region, within and between our communities, in our region and nation which easily express themselves in violence of unimaginable proportions, is a sad commentary on our state of development. It is in this regard that the wholly inexcusable destruction of lives and property in some of our Ogoni communities, notably the recent K and B Dere crisis demands our outright condemnation just as, on the national scene, we equally condemn the recent spate of bombings in parts of Yenagoa, Jos and Abuja, amongst others.

Whilst not making any excuses for criminality, we must also call on the governments to acknowledge that the prevailing regime of youth employment is contributing to the reason why a growing fringe of youths have been attracted to illegitimate means of fending for themselves. Whilst the amount of money accruing from bunkering, kidnapping and pay-offs by some unscrupulous politicians may act as disincentive to genuine employment in some cases, we must balance our insistence that our youths eschew violence in pressing for legitimate demands with providing sustainable alternatives for them.

I call on governments at all levels to put their money where their mouth is, by reducing their overhead costs by 50% and channel same to the provision of youth employment and I believe the insecurity and crime rate would consequently drop significantly.

Let me end with the plea to all of us that MOSOP and its message must not be confused with its messengers nor should it be contaminated. As sure as daylight, messengers of the message come and go but the message remains. We may disagree with the messengers, indeed disapprove of them but we all owe it as a duty to our forebears and the succeeding generations not to kill the message with the messenger.

As you are all aware, from the inception of MOSOP, I have had the singular privilege and indeed honour of being a leading part of the MOSOP messengers. Just as the MOSOP struggle has mutated into a metaphor of the struggle for justice for several peoples of the region, many of whom

may not have found their voices, its messengers must similarly respond to the changing times. It is in this respect, my people, that I want to publicly announce to you all that this is my last address as President of MOSOP as I would no longer be offering myself for re-election during the MOSOP's elections due by the third quarter of this year. In the course of my leadership, I have enjoyed tremendous support from all of you for which I am eternally grateful. I would also plead that you extend the same support to whoever you may choose as my successor. Let me add that in coming to this decision, I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for the struggle which has been my life, no deficiency of grateful respect for the tremendous support and respect which you all have given me all these years but am supported by a full conviction that the step is compatible with both. For the avoidance of doubt, as long as I live, I will always be and work for MOSOP, but there comes a time when one must move on, and my time is now.

I thank you all!

[ENDS/ CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]