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Article

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### ARTISANAL REFINERIES IN THE NIGER DELTA AND NIGERIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY, 1999-2009

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#### Abstract

The discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Nigeria in 1956 ushered in a period, characterized by endemic crises of oil rents management and corporate insecurity. From 1999, democratic renewal, backed by excess oil rents returns, made the popular democratic control of oil wealth critical as the region witnessed the proliferation of different militant groups. Frustrated by lack of benefits from oil production, communities began to target the operations of energy companies, demanding better public services and a greater share of government revenues. The unrest turned into worrying criminal movements, which feeds on massive thefts and the establishment of illegal production facilities of crude oil known as 'artisanal refineries.' It is observed that, the practice of artisanal crude oil refining may have appeared lucrative as it proffered solution to some of the problems of unemployment, provided some basic social amenities and proffered a solution to the problem of scarcity of crude products in the country. However, its implications on national security outweighed the assumed benefits; hence, the importance of oil to Nigeria's security, economic survival and political stability cannot be overemphasized. The study adopted a historical and content method of analysis, while both primary and secondary sources of data were utilized. The study concluded that, except drastic action is taken to address the activities of artisanal refineries in the region, the Nigerian economy will be heading for a doom and this will pose a grave consequence to Nigeria's national security and economic survival.

**Keywords:** Artisanal Refineries; Niger Delta; National Security, Unemployment, Oil Exploration, Nigeria.

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## **Introduction**

Few years ago, the Niger Delta region, the hub of Nigeria's oil and gas production was almost ungovernable. Hostage-taking of foreign oil workers, sabotage of oil pipelines and other petroleum production facilities as well as other vices were the order of the day. Militants in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta began a campaign of kidnappings and pipeline bombings in the early 2000s. After a government-sponsored amnesty programme in 2009, violence dropped, while oil production increased. But oil theft and the activities of illegal artisanal refineries (a lucrative criminal industry), continued to draw many militants - new and old - back into the delta's winding creeks. While former kingpins profess to have left the oil-theft business, many former militant foot soldiers that were paid less or not at all by the amnesty, and have few job prospects, continued to pursue prosperity by tapping pipelines and illegal refining of crude oil.<sup>1</sup> Oil theft and illegal artisanal refining of crude oil have greatly increased - and piracy seems to be an important aspect of it. According to research, more than 300,000 barrels of oil were stolen from Nigerian pipelines daily.<sup>2</sup> Piracy, drug trafficking and arms proliferation have been reinforced by artisanal refining. According to data, illegal artisanal refining related violence has caused over 500 fatalities in the region.<sup>3</sup> These situations invariably have affected the national security.<sup>4</sup> Illegal artisanal refineries have been an economic and security problem in Nigeria since the 80s and government over the years has been putting measures in place to check it.<sup>5</sup> But despite all the measures undertaken by the government, illegal artisanal refineries continued to increase in scope and dimension. Oil is the major catalyst that drives the Nigerian economy and by implication the determinant of its entire socio-political configuration. Consequently, anything that covertly or overtly affects oil production in Nigeria poses a direct threat to her national economy, political stability, territorial integrity and national security. This study examines the dynamics of artisanal crude oil refining in the Niger Delta. It traces the origin, causes and implication to national security between 1999 and 2009. The year 1999 is chosen as the originating chronology to mark the transition from military regimes to democratic rule in Nigeria; while 2009 is chosen as the terminating chronology to mark the period the Federal government instituted the amnesty programme which granted ex-militants operating in the Niger Delta region presidential pardon and reintegration into the society. It was expected that by 1999, democratic rule would bring about an end to the restiveness.

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<sup>1</sup>D. Hinshaw, "Niger Delta Amnesty Program Fails to End Militancy." *The Wall Street Journal*, Volume 4 (2012), pp. 56-67

<sup>2</sup>U. Akpan, "Indigenous Operators Express Worry as Cost of Oil Theft hits N15.66n," *National Mirror*, (2013); E. Odemwingie, J. Nda-Isaiah, "Nigeria Loses 400,000 Barrels Daily to Crude Oil Theft-Senate." *Leadership*, (2013); R. Okere "Curtailling Oil Theft, Illegal Bunkering via Legislation," *The Guardian*, (2013); S. Nwanosike, "illegal Oil Bunkering: Matters Arising." *The Tide* (2013). Available at: [www.thetide.com](http://www.thetide.com).

<sup>3</sup> Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map ([www.p4p-nigerdelta.org](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org))

<sup>4</sup> National security deals with the security and defence of the state, including its citizens, economy, and institutions, which are regarded as a duty of the government to abate. Originally national security was conceived as protection against military attacks, but the non-military dimension such as the security from terrorism, minimization of crime, economic security, energy security, environmental security, food security, and cyber-security, have been added. In: Joseph J Romm, "Defining national security: the nonmilitary aspects." *Pew Project on America's Task in a Changed World (Pew Project Series). Council on Foreign Relations* (1993). p. 122. ISBN 978-0-87609-135-7. Retrieved 22 September 2010.

<sup>5</sup>S. Nwanosike, "illegal Oil Bunkering: Matters Arising." *The Tide*. (2013). Available at: [www.thetide.com](http://www.thetide.com).

## **Background to Niger Delta Oil Crisis**

The Niger Delta of Nigeria is situated on the Gulf of Guinea and covers an area of over 70,000 square kilometers. The area is highly diverse with over 40 ethnic groups who speak more than 100 languages and dialects, and whose traditional livelihood involves mainly farming and fishing. The region comprises 185 out of the 774 local government areas and covers nine out of the 36 states of Nigeria: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. It was over 30 million people, according to a 2006 population census,<sup>6</sup> and an estimated population density of 265 people per square kilometer, the region accounts for more than 23 percent of Nigeria's population.<sup>7</sup> The Niger Delta contains vast reserves of oil and gas, which play a significant role in the Nigerian economy. Despite these abundant natural resources, the region is marked by poverty, underdevelopment, environmental degradation, and insecurity. Historical tensions and a proliferation of armed groups (militant, criminal, and ethno-sectarian) contribute to the changing conflict and security dynamics in the region.

Historically, the Niger Delta region has been marked by violent agitation over political rights, resource control and environmental protection. The struggle for local control of oil resources and environmental remediation later evolved into armed insurgency. On February 23, 1966, a secession led by Isaac Adaka Boro declared the Niger Delta region, a republic. Between the 1980s and 1990s, many social justice movements and ethnic militias emerged to protest against the devastating impact of oil exploration and production. A notable group that emerged during that period was the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, an environmental rights activist.<sup>8</sup> The killing of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other MOSOP leaders by the military government in 1995 triggered a series of violent agitation and the emergence of several militant groups in the region. Between 1999 and 2009, several militant groups emerged, including the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).<sup>9</sup> These militant groups took up arms against the government and engaged in the kidnapping of oil workers, vandalism of oil facilities and illegal oil bunkering. In 2009, the federal government instituted an amnesty programme to incentivize militants with allowances and capacity building training to end the insurgency. Some of the militants however continued to engage in illegal oil bunkering and artisanal refining because of the lucrative nature of the business, and the failure of the amnesty programme to effectively address the underlying causes and drivers of militancy in the region.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The relative deprivation theory is the theoretical construct used in this study. Relative deprivation is a multidisciplinary theory used in investigating a social relation in a given environment. The theory is attributed to Samuel A Stouffer (1990-1960) based on his observation during World War II.<sup>10</sup> Relative deprivation has it that someone feels deprived of something to which she/he is entitled but while others become beneficiaries. Pettigrew

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<sup>6</sup>National Population Commission (NPC), '2006 Population Census,' Available at: <http://nationalpopulation.gov.ng/census-enumeration>

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup>UNEP, Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)*, 2011. Available at: [https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP\\_OEA.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP_OEA.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Hauser, "Samuel Andrew Stouffer 1900-1960," *The American Statistician, Volume 14*, No. 4 (1960), p. 36.

posited that relative deprivation is a subjective state that shapes emotions, cognition, and behaviour. It also links the individual with the interpersonal and inter-group levels of analysis.<sup>11</sup> The theory of relative deprivation has been proven useful in various ways, especially in situations of frustration and discontent in an environment where people feel that they have been unjustly treated, and abused by state powers. Studies have revealed lawlessness and impunity in analyzing conflict inherent in such a system. The people of the region believed they have been deprived, and denied the benefits of petrodollar revenue by the federal government and the multinational oil and gas companies operating in the area. The inhabitants of the region feel bemoaned and deprived of these benefits from crude oil extracted from their communities and region, hence, the resultant consequence is the arbitrary setting up of illegal refining of the crude oil which has adversely impacted the socioeconomic development of the region and security of the nation.

### **Artisanal Refineries in the Niger Delta**

Artisanal refining is the process where stolen crude oil is refined illegally by local people using local resources and crude skills (drawing on the indigenous technology used to distill locally made gin). The basic materials include rudimentary steels, which often are metal pipes and drums welded together. The crude oil is boiled and the fumes from it are collected, cooled, and condensed in tanks to be used locally for energy, or fuel. This basic refining technique was first used during the Civil War by Biafrans, and modernized by members of militant camps between 2005 and 2009, providing fuel and cash to support the Niger Delta insurgency. After the 2009 amnesty deal by President Yar'Adua was brokered; some militants went home to their villages with their knowledge of refining with them and continued their illegal refining. The inability to stop these illegal refining at the early stage and with the huge commercial rewards available, the trade grew and became more entrenched in the communities in the region. These artisanal refining scattered all over the region produce about forty to sixty drums of diesel a day.<sup>12</sup> There were different sites with varying sizes and different levels of production. Small-scale ones attract people with low levels of capital to start while larger-scale sites involve entrepreneurs with large capitals who own relatively large production sites. Artisanal refining damaged the environment greatly, and people's farmland and water bodies are also affected. In the refining process, there is a significant quantity of waste being dumped into rivers and streams or on land – two drums of crude oil translate into one drum of the product once refined. Open fires were used to heat up the distilleries and fed by crude oil that is tipped into pits in the ground. As a large quantity of the oil burns away, some seeps into the ground during the process of refining. The resulting oil spills from broken pipes and wastes from tens of thousands of makeshift refineries combine to produce enormous environmental pollution on land and in the creeks. A large number of accidents, fires, and explosions occur, apart from the high risk of self-harm from illegal refining.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Charles Chukwurah Mezie-Okoye, The Political Economy of Artisanal Refining in the Niger Delta, *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)*, Volume 5, No. 2 (2022), pp. 7-18.

<sup>13</sup>UNEP, Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)*, 2011. Available at: [https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP\\_OEA.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP_OEA.pdf).

### **Causes of Artisanal Refining in the Niger Delta**

The emergence of illegal refining in the Niger Delta has been discussed by several scholars. Different factors necessitated this thriving business of oil theft and illegal refining in the Niger Delta region. Brock posited that what is going on in the region came about as a result of many years of neglect, marginalization, and underdevelopment of the region by the Federal Government and the Multinational Oil Companies (MNCs) as well as rings of organized criminal gangs, called – oil bunkers. These groups operate in the creeks and along the territorial waters, they specialized in stealing, illegal refining and transporting of Nigeria's crude oil to the international black market.<sup>14</sup> Some of the identified underlying causes of this scourge include poverty, corruption, unemployment, ineffective law enforcement and poor governance, inordinate ambition to amass wealth, poor policing/protection of oil pipelines, inadequate community participation in the management of resources in their communities, pollution of the environment, dearth of economic activities in communities, increasing criminality and insecurity of the coastline, flourishing of the oil black market in Nigeria and high foreign demand of Nigeria crude oil.<sup>15</sup> The above situation suggests that the discovery of oil in the region was not a blessing but a curse, and the cause of the suffering the people of the region went through. The Federal government and the Multinationals are busy making millions of dollars while the goose that lay the golden eggs is wallowing in poverty and deprivation. This is the major reason the youths felt frustrated and not successful in the illegal artisanal refining of crude oil. The illegal production of crude oil produced a lot of social vices such as corruption of all sorts which include: politicians, military personnel, police, traditional rulers, among others. The environment is degraded, and there is no quality air and water to drink and/or stream and rivers to fish in many villages.

Oil theft and illegal refining are a long practices in Niger Delta region. It started late 1970s after the civil war. It was carried out under the command of top military personnel who used it to enrich themselves and forcefully maintain political stability.<sup>16</sup> However, the illegal activities took a new turn during the youth militancy agitation for resource control.<sup>17</sup> Initially, the agitation by the region's youths was primarily political with youths demanding an increase in the derivation fund (a specific percentage of oil rents accrued to the federal government), but when the government was unable to meet all their demands, many of these youths took up arms against the government and engaged in criminal activities such as kidnapping, destruction of oil facilities, oil theft, sea piracy, among others.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars believed that it was ethnic marginalization and neglect that were the major factors

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<sup>14</sup>Judith Burdin Asuni, *Blood Oil in the Niger Delta: Special Report 229. United States Institute of Peace. Washington, DC (2009).*

<sup>15</sup>Sofiri Joab-Peterside, Oil theft and artisanal refining in the Niger Delta: Dynamics and socio-economic implications. *Port Harcourt Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 5, No. 1&2(2014), pp. 247–260; H. O. Boris, The Upsurge of Oil Theft and Illegal Bunkering in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 6, No. 3(2015), pp. 235–245; Tubodenyefa Zibima, "Structure and agency: Understanding the social dynamics of the proliferation of artisanal/illegal refineries in the Niger Delta, Nigeria." *Port Harcourt Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 5, No. 1&2(2014), pp. 147–159.

<sup>16</sup>Sofiri Joab-Peterside, 'Oil theft and artisanal refining in the Niger Delta: Dynamics and socio-economic implications.' *Port Harcourt Journal of Social Sciences*, Volume 5, No. 1 and 2 (2014), pp. 56-67.

<sup>17</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>18</sup>*ibid.*

responsible for the spread and expansion of artisanal refining in the Niger Delta region. Be that as it may, political exclusion and inequity were also identified as a contributory factor.

Oil theft, also referred to as oil bunkering occurred in three different modes in the Niger Delta region.<sup>19</sup> The first mode involved locally confined activities in which oil is siphoned from pipelines that are punctured or cut with a hacksaw, and the oil collected is then refined crudely and sold within the community.<sup>20</sup> In the second mode, oil thieves attached plastic hoses to wellheads or manifold points to divert the oil directly into barges, ships, or canoes,<sup>21</sup> after which the oil is transported through the Niger Delta's dense network of creeks, swamps and estuaries' and offloaded into tankers often anchored at the mouths of coastal rivers. When these tankers have been filled, the oil is transferred into other large tankers of mother ships on the high seas.<sup>22</sup> The third mode which is termed the 'white-collar branch of oil thefts' involved lifting excess crude oil by extraction license holders and falsification of bills of lading records to cover up the actual quantity of oil being shipped out of the country. Incidentally, the host communities saw illegal refining as expedient and justifiable, given the absence of gainful employment in the cities, towns, and rural communities of the region. The perpetrators of this illegal business boasted that the security operatives cannot stop them and that their products are as good as the imported or produced in the main refineries. During the course of this study, some people interviewed said that the illegally refined petroleum products like fuel, kerosene, and diesel supported local demand and contributed to the sustenance of the Nigeria economy such that if they stop operation over a period of time, there would be an energy crisis in Nigeria as some of their products were also bought and distributed nationwide by tanker drivers and registered marketers.<sup>23</sup>

### **Decline in Performance of Existing Government Refineries: A Structural Factor**

The decline in the performance of the refineries started in the early 1990s, after the military Government ordered NNPC to close its accounts in commercial banks and transfer them to the Central Bank. NNPC lost its autonomy. It became increasingly subjected to interference and directives by politicians. It could no longer ensure prompt maintenance of the refineries. Most importantly, decision on when to carry out turnaround maintenance and which contractor to execute it came under the influence of the Government rather than by the professional within the operation. Things very quickly went downhill thereafter as a result. The decline in production capacity led to establishment of artisanal refineries as the volume of oil products could not sustain the growing needs of the people.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Thisday Newspaper, 'Illegal Refinery Activities, Gas Flaring and Danger Posed on Rivers Residents,' *Thisday Newspaper*, January 31, 2022. Available at: <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2022/01/31/illegal-refinery-activities-gas-flaring-and-danger-posed-on-rivers-residents/>

<sup>20</sup>Judith Burdin Asuni, Blood Oil in the Niger Delta, *Special Report, United States Institute of Peace* (2009). <https://www.usip.org/publications/2009/08/blood-oil-niger-delta>.

<sup>21</sup>Augustine Ikelegbe, The Economy of Conflict in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, *African and Asian Studies*, Volume 5, No. 1 (2005), pp. 23-56

<sup>22</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Peter O. Barikoloma, BO Tai Youth Leader, Ogoniland, Direct Interview, 23 December, 2023.

<sup>24</sup>Anthony Ogbuigwe, Refining in Nigeria: History, challenges and prospects, *Applied Petrochemical Research*, Volume 8, No. 2 (2018), pp. 34-45.



### **Artisanal Refineries and its Social Implications**

Artisanal refiners formed part of a local economy and not accorded an unlawful license to operate by communities in much the same way as the official oil industries, resulting to oil spills from broken pipes and wastes from tens of thousands of makeshift refineries which combined to produce enormous environmental pollution on water, air land - especially in the creeks. Artisanal refining is not a community "all comers affairs," rather, intending refiners and investors aware required to register with unions at prohibitive prices. Youths engaged in this business are often community overlords. However, rival gangs usually sprang up to challenge their structures - leading to arms proliferation.<sup>25</sup> There are also reported cases of drops in school enrolment, especially students of both colleges and tertiary institution, as most youths are engaged as refiners, security guards, product marketers or transporters, among others. The vast extent of fire damage around the camps, storage facilities in the communities as well as the use of poorly refined kerosene are evidence of how highly explosive the practice is.<sup>26</sup> The quality of products obtained varied widely. To address shortages in preferred products like diesel, refiners sometimes purified diesel by mixing it with kerosene to reach a large refining standard and these practices, in the long run, affected consumers who spent huge resources in fixing vehicles and machinery as a result of using products from artisanal refineries.<sup>27</sup> Other societal ills passed by illegal artisanal refining are prostitution, especially in communities where bush refineries exist. Those who engaged in artisanal refineries could not go as far to major cities, so social sex workers prefer to reside in these communities and tap from the fruit of this business. There is also an increase in arm robbery and sea piracy on the waterways,<sup>28</sup> causing serious threat to life and property. Illegal oil refining also carrying significant health risks. The handling and heating of the crude oil pollute the air. The camps have toxic feel and the health impacts on those working there are enormous. Communities are constantly exposed to inhalation of poisonous gases, causing cough and breathing problems.<sup>29</sup> These symptoms are actually self-reinforcing. For instance, environmental damage, create an economic wasteland which rendered both aquatic life and land uninhabitable.<sup>30</sup>

### **Artisanal Refineries and its Economic Implications**

The economic impact of artisanal refining on the oil industry is said to be variable. Some oil industry participants at a round table discussion on oil theft in the Niger Delta,<sup>31</sup> argued that artisanal refining had a very limited economic impact on their operations. They primarily emphasized the negative environmental impact, health and safety issues and downplayed

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<sup>25</sup>T. Attah, Oil theft and artisanal (illegal) refining in Nigeria – scale, impacts and the need for a multi-dimensional response Chatham House – *Gulf of Guinea Security Conference, London*. December 6, 2012.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> SDN, Illegal Oil Refining in the Niger Delta, (2013) Available at: [www.stakeholderdemocracy.org](http://www.stakeholderdemocracy.org)

<sup>29</sup> UNEP, Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland, *United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)*, 2011. Available at: [https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP\\_OEA.pdf](https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/OEA/UNEP_OEA.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> A. E. Ite, and K. T. Semple, "Biodegradation of petroleum hydrocarbons in contaminated soils," R. Arora (ed.), *Microbial Biotechnology: Energy and Environment* (Wallingford, Oxfordshire: CAB International, 2012), pp. 250-278.

<sup>31</sup>T. Attah, Oil theft and artisanal (illegal) refining in Nigeria – scale, impacts and the need for a multi-dimensional response Chatham House...

the economic aspect of it. The present study observes significant economic cost of both artisanal refining and highly organized oil theft in Nigeria. The link is the forced pipeline shutdowns created by small-scale tapping also formed a vicious circle, that facilitated large scale oil theft.

### **Artisanal Refineries and National Security, 1999 – 2009**

The post-independence phase of struggle in the Niger Delta began with the declaration of an Independent Niger Delta Republic by Isaac Adaka Boro<sup>32</sup> during president Ironsi's administration. Later, local communities began to demand social and environmental justice from the federal government, with Ken-Saro Wiwa and the Ogoni tribe as lead figures for this phase of the struggle. Cohesive oil protests became most pronounced in 1990 with the publication of the Ogoni Bill of Rights. In this instance, the people protested against the lack of economic development, such as: schools, good roads, hospitals, among others. They also complained about environmental pollution and destruction of their land and rivers by foreign oil companies. Ken Saro Wiwa and nine other oil activists from Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) were arrested and killed under Sani Abacha in 1995.<sup>33</sup> When long-held concerns about loss of control over resources to the oil companies were voiced by the Ijaw people in the Kaiama Declaration in 1998, the Nigerian government sent troops to occupy the Bayelsa and Delta states. Nigeria soldiers opened fire with rifles, machine guns, and tear gas, killing few protesters and arrested about twenty-five.<sup>34</sup> From then, local indigenous activity against commercial oil refineries and pipelines in the region began to increase in frequency and militancy. Foreign employees of Shell, the primary corporation operating in the region, were taken hostage by local people. Other activities were that of the vandalism of oil facilities, oil theft crisis and proliferation of illegal artisanal crude oil facilities. Such activities resulted in greater governmental intervention in the area and the mobilization of the Nigerian Army and State Security Service into the region, resulting in more violence and human rights abuses.

In April 2006, a bomb exploded near an oil refinery in the Niger Delta region, a warning against Chinese expansion in the region. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) stated: "We wish to warn the Chinese government and its oil companies to steer well clear of the Niger Delta. The Chinese government, by investing in stolen crude, places its citizens in our line of fire."<sup>35</sup> In September 2008, MEND released a statement proclaiming that their militants had launched an "oil war" throughout the Niger Delta against both, pipelines and oil-production facilities, and the Nigerian soldiers that protected them. Both MEND and the Nigerian Government claimed to have inflicted heavy casualties on one another.<sup>36</sup> In August 2009, the Nigerian government granted amnesty to the militants; many militants subsequently surrendered their weapons in exchange for a presidential pardon, rehabilitation programme, and education.

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<sup>32</sup>Laine Strutton, *The New Mobilization from Below: Women's Oil Protests in the Niger Delta, Nigeria ProQuest*, Volume 1 (2014)

<sup>33</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>"State of Emergency Declared in the Niger Delta." *Human Rights Watch*, December 30, 1998.

<sup>35</sup>Ian Taylor, "China's environmental footprint in Africa," *China Dialogue*, Archived 2007-02-23, *Wayback Machine*, 2 February 2007.

<sup>36</sup>"Nigeria militants warn of oil war," *BBC News*, Archived 2008-09-15, *Wayback Machine*, 14 September 2008.



Between 1999 and 2009, the conflict between the federal government and the Niger Delta agitators gave room to proliferation of militant groups, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), the Ijaw National Congress (INC), the Egbesu Boys of Africa Council (EBA), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Ijaw National Rights Protection Organization (INRPO), and the Ogoni Patriotic Union (OPU), among others, who found pleasure in establishing in crude oil theft and establishment artisanal refineries. The artisanal refineries were used to sustain their activities, such as the purchase of arms and ammunition which were used to fight government forces. The trade in small arms and light weapons also fueled violent clashes in the region.

As indicated, the existence of illegal artisanal refineries gave room for more militant groups who sustained their trade in crude oil theft and sales with local and international syndicates. The well-organized syndicated crime gangs and militant groups, involved in the business, were able to sustain the flow of the products was to plug back a part of the proceeds from the stolen crude oil into weapon acquisition to fan the conflicts. Apart from outright insecurity that the foregoing situation posed to the Niger Delta region and the entire country, the huge profit of the illegal private business also translated into incalculable loss to the Nigerian state which owned 55% in the joint venture with Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), among others.<sup>37</sup>

Artisanal crude oil refineries led to a continued proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALWs) in the Niger Delta. It also ignited and exacerbated many inter-ethnic conflicts among the people as well as created a general sense of insecurity in the entire region. Many of the arms in circulation in the Niger Delta, including a variety of sophisticated weapons, are purchased with money derived directly or indirectly from illegal artisanal refining. Insecurity in some parts of the country resulted in part, from accessibility of oil-purchased arms with illegal artisanal refineries serving as a major contributor to Nigeria's violent crime, armed robbery and piracy, and kidnapping.<sup>38</sup>

The social and security implications of all these include the destruction of the economy of communities, arms proliferation, increased attraction to crimes, higher incidence of school drop-outs, increased inflow of migrant workers to service the illegal business and the consequences of militarization of communities. All these negative impacts had long-term implications.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Katsouris and Sayne noted that oil theft and artisanal crude oil refining has been the major cause of violent conflict in the Niger Delta.<sup>40</sup> Most of the artisanal crude oil refiners exchanged the products for heavy arms at the high sea, while others used the proceeds to import arms into the region, with the principal aim of using the arms to secure their illegal activities in the region. The arms are used for attacks and counter attacks from different militant groups and security agents, as every group is bound to have adequate arms and begun-battle ready to enable them remain in the business. This situation has resulted in proliferation of small and heavy arms in the region, leading to constant

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<sup>37</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>O. Onwuemenyi, "Oil bunkering undermining Nigerian economy," *Vanguard* (2012). Available at: [www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06](http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06). Retrieved on November 29, 2013.

<sup>39</sup>A. Igbuku, "Crude Oil Theft and Illegal Refining in the Niger Delta." *Delta State Oil and Gas Stakeholders' Conference*, Tuesday, April 15, 2014. Available at: <http://reformeronline.com/crude-oil-theft-and-illegal-refining-in-the-niger-delta/>. Retrieved August 20, 2014.

<sup>40</sup>C. Katsouris, and A. Sayne, *Nigeria's Criminal Crude: International Options to Combat the Export of Stolen Oil* (London: Chatham House, 2013).

attacks and counter attacks by different militant groups, and insecurity of lives and properties in the region.<sup>41</sup> The insecurity provided the enabling ground for kidnapping activities of expatriates, oil and top government workers for financial ransom in the region. Wilson observed:

The violence and crisis occasioned by the artisanal crude oil refining activities in the Niger Delta region is spreading speedily to other parts of Nigeria and beyond. Firstly, with the heavy arms in the possession of the youths and the constant attacks on oil and non-oil facilities for economic benefits of the actors, youths from other geo-political regions see the oil theft activities as very lucrative and are recruited into artisanal crude oil refining activities as a means of economic empowerment. The same youths irrespective of geo-political region of origin are empowered with heavy arms and they use same to cause violence in different parts of the country. They are also sometimes used by the politicians to either attack political opponents or rig elections, thereby increasing the insecurity challenge of the nation. Secondly, larger part of the oil theft and local crude oil refining is carried out in the high seas and oil export terminals, thereby increasing the activities of the sea pirates in the sub-region.<sup>42</sup>

The sea pirates also benefited from the oil theft, thereby resulting to the escalation of sea pirate activities in the waterways, and bridging free movement of goods and services in the sub-region. The pirates attacked oil investors and their investments, while the state security agents gave counter attack to the pirates, thereby leading to constant violence and attacks in the West African waterways. This violence perpetuated by the oil theft, artisanal crude oil refiners and sea pirates threatened the peace and security of Nigeria. Illegal Artisanal crude oil refining and crude oil theft that led to piracy and criminal activities in the Niger Delta created insecurity and breached of peace that along the line affected legitimate social and economic activities in the country. These problems also had damaging consequence that gave signal to the rest of the international community that Nigeria is not safe for economic investment. This is particularly damaging in view of the efforts being made to create the desired atmosphere to attract foreign investment.

#### **Militant Groups and Artisanal Refineries**

- i. **Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF):** The Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) was one of the largest armed groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and was composed primarily of members of the region's largest ethnic group - the Ijaw people. The group was founded in 2004 in an attempt to gain more control over the region's vast petroleum resources, particularly in Delta State. The NDPVF frequently demanded a greater share of the oil wealth from both the state and federal government and supported independence for the Delta region. Until 2005 the group was spearheaded by Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, who was viewed by many Delta residents as a folk hero. This group was into serious oil theft and operation of artisanal oil

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<sup>41</sup>G. Wilson, "The Nigerian State and Oil Theft in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*. Volume 16, No. 1(2014), pp. 69-81.

<sup>42</sup>*ibid.*

refineries scattered within the region.<sup>43</sup> The inspiration for a militia was gotten from Isaac Boro, who in 1965, declared the Niger Delta Republic.<sup>44</sup>

- ii. **The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND):** The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) was a decentralized militant group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. MEND's actions include: sabotage, theft, property destruction, guerrilla warfare, and kidnapping, which were part of the broader conflict in the Niger Delta and reduced Nigeria's oil production by 33% between 2006 and 2004.<sup>45</sup> MEND's other goals included localizing control of Nigeria's oil and securing reparations from the federal government for pollution caused by the oil industry. In an interview with one of the group's leaders, who used the alias Major-General Godswill Tamuno, the BBC reported that MEND was fighting for "total control" of the Niger Delta's oil wealth, saying local people had not gained from the riches under the ground and the region's creeks and swamps.<sup>46</sup> Several illegal refineries were setup by MEND in order to carter for their logistics and acquisition of arms for their struggle.
- iii. **The Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV):** was an armed militia group in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The NDV was led by Ateke Tom. The group was composed primarily by ethnic Ijaws around Port Harcourt and their main goal was controlling the area's vast oil resources.<sup>47</sup> In late 2003 the NDV precipitated a conflict with their rival Ijaw ethnic militia, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF). The two groups spent most of 2004 in an escalating conflict which was ended when the Nigerian government and military eventually intervened on the side of the NDV in the summer of 2004.<sup>48</sup> The government's support of the NDV eventually precipitated the Nigerian oil crisis, beginning in October 2004.
- iv. **The Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF):** This was a militant group in Nigeria's Niger Delta. In 1998, the Ijaw Youth Council was formed and many militants were brought up in the Youth Council. In 1999, the Odi Massacre occurred in Bayelsa State which was the spark that erupted into violence. In 2004, the Joint Revolutionary Council was formed and recruited members to rock the Nigerian petroleum industry to its core. In 2005, high-ranking member John Togo formed a splinter group against the Joint Revolutionary Council didn't deliver much damage. Togo recruited about 4,000 members and went into the Niger Delta to begin attacks. The group's leader John Togo claimed that their main goal was to secede from, and gain independence from Nigeria. The group was closely linked to the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta and fight side by

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<sup>43</sup>Jennifer M.Hazen and Horner Jonas, "Annexe 6: Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF)." *Small Arms, Armed Violence, and Insecurity in Nigeria: The Niger Delta in Perspective. Small Arms Survey.*(2007), pp. 127–129.

<sup>44</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>45</sup>Stephanie Hanson, "MEND: The Niger Delta's Umbrella Militant Group." *Council on Foreign Relations.*(2007-03-22). Archived from the original on 2009-07-20.

<sup>46</sup>MEND's other goals include localizing control of Nigeria's oil and securing reparations from the federal government for pollution caused by the oil industry. In an interview with one of the group's leaders, who used the alias Major-General Godswill Tamuno, the BBC reported that MEND was fighting for "total control" of the Niger Delta's oil wealth, saying local people had not gained from the riches under the ground and the region's creeks and swamps

<sup>47</sup> "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta" (Report). *Council on Foreign Relations.* Archived from the original (PDF) on August 31, 2023. Retrieved December 20, 2019.

<sup>48</sup>*ibid.*

side against the Nigerian Army,<sup>49</sup> and they were into oil theft and illegal refining of crude oil.

## **Conclusion**

The practice of artisanal crude oil refining may look lucrative as it proffered solution to some of the problems of unemployment in the Niger Delta region. It also proffered a solution to the problem of scarcity of crude products in the country and contributed to the growth of the host communities in terms of providing some basic social amenities. However, the implications to national security, associated with the activities of artisanal refineries in the region, outweighed the assumed benefits. The importance of oil to Nigeria's security, economic survival and political stability cannot be overemphasized as the nation depends majorly on oil revenue for her economic survival. The rate at which militant groups grew in number between 1999 and 2009 was so alarming that it led to oil theft, illegal oil refining, ethnic conflict and proliferation of small and light weapons in Nigeria linked to the theory of relative deprivation. This study notes that the increase in artisanal refineries, piracy and other forms of criminality in the Niger Delta suggest that the fragile peace established by the amnesty programme is at risk because the government did not address most of the major concerns of the people, hence the slide-back into instability of the region. The increase of crude oil theft and illegal artisanal refineries in the Niger Delta is a threat to economic viability of Nigeria and a challenge that is critical to the wellbeing of the industry that drives the Nigerian economy. Except drastic action is taken to address the Niger Delta crisis and put an end to the activities of artisanal refineries in the region, the Nigerian economy will be heading for a doom and this will pose a grave consequence to Nigeria's national security and economic survival. Also, this can be achieved if the government owned refineries are fully activated for refining operations.

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<sup>49</sup>*ibid.*

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