

# History Never Quite Repeats: Militancy in the Niger Delta

Briefing: February 2017

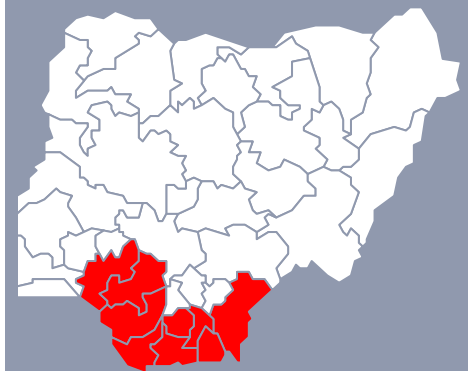
Throughout 2016, there was a marked rise in violence in the Niger Delta not seen since the end of the first phase of militancy in 2009. While there are historical echoes to be sure, there are also distinct differences in dynamics that must be recognized in order to respond in a way that is relevant to the current context and effective to defuse a very combustible situation. Similarities include symbols, grievances, demands, and tactics of militant groups, and the people that they claim to represent. But the socio-political environment is different, and in some ways more complex this time around, posing a challenge to those tasked with the responsibility to respond. As tempting as it may be for analysts and policy makers to apply the same lens to both time periods, actors must strive to formulate responses that are comprehensive and do not deescalate one conflict driver only to exacerbate another. The following briefing will summarize the interrelated conflict drivers common to both time periods, as well as differences. It will also suggest some potential approaches that bear these complexities in mind.

## Militancy in the Niger Delta: 2003-2009 & 2016-Present

Conflict in the Niger Delta is an intersectional mix of criminality (including robbery, piracy and kidnapping), cult and gang violence, election violence, ethnic, communal violence, and land disputes, all of which feed into and are exacerbated by militancy. Today's most well-known militant group, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) shares some similarities with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Both primarily comprise ethnic Ijaws and the NDA has taken some pages from the MEND playbook, including attacks on energy infrastructure, the demand for the release of prominent local figures from prison, and the stated objective of a greater share in resource control. For more on this see the July 2016 briefing on "[New Wave of Militancy in the Niger Delta](#)."

At the same time, there are stark differences between militancy then and now, including the NDA emphasis of trying to appeal to grievances beyond the Ijaw constituency, including the Ogoni and Igbo ethnic groups. In addition, in the current conflict landscape, instead of an Ijaw militancy concentrated in Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers states united under one banner, there are more than a dozen groups from many different ethnic compositions spanning the wider Niger Delta region; from

### Niger Delta Region, Nigeria



This briefing outlines the background and historical significance of militancy in the Niger Delta. It summarizes the recent trends in violence and insecurity, and provides recommendations for promoting greater peace and security within the region.

*Scope and Limitations: We recognize that the data collected in this project is not an exhaustive tally of all incidents of violence. However, to the extent that data are representative of the patterns and trends, findings are indicated in the report.*

Delta state in the west to Cross River state in the east, each expressing both cross-cutting and divergent demands and ideologies.

Another difference in 2016 is the sheer velocity of the feedback loops between different conflict drivers. It has long been the case that violence entrepreneurs in criminal cult groups such as the Greenlanders and the Icelanders, have been militarized in times of insurgency, politicized in times of elections, or polarized in times of inter-communal tensions. But now, with increased socio-political fragmentation, the volatility of these various streams has accelerated. While it used to be that peace and security actors could address these issues as more or less discrete problems, of late these risk factors have escalated simultaneously (see Figure 2).

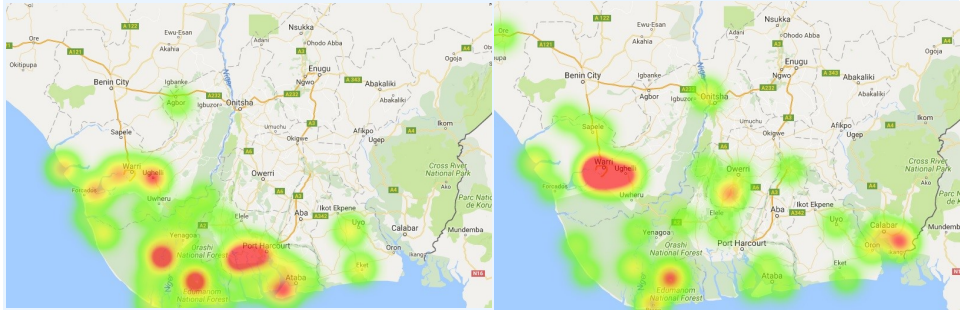
In the 2009 environment, for instance, amnesty was affective in taking the wind out of the sails of militancy. In the current landscape, however, even setting aside the government’s budgetary constraints, this complexity now makes the notion of “purchasing peace” less likely to be successful and instead to perversely incentivize political, communal, cultist, and militant violence on the part of disparate constituencies claiming a seat at the table.

In both 2009 and 2016, the power jockeying between various political and cult group leaders, coupled with the kidnapping of oil workers (especially in the first wave) and the attacks on oil infrastructure, drew in the participation of the national security forces. This has sometimes had the effect of widening the rift between local communities and the national government. During the previous wave of militancy, this also served to unite warring groups and factions, deescalating tensions among opposing militant leaders and cult figures and helping them to reorganize themselves under one banner. The 2009 Amnesty Programme then, provide a broad platform for groups to make collective demands, such as the

**Figure 1: The New Wave-A Wider Geographic Spread**

**Militancy in 2009 (4 States)**

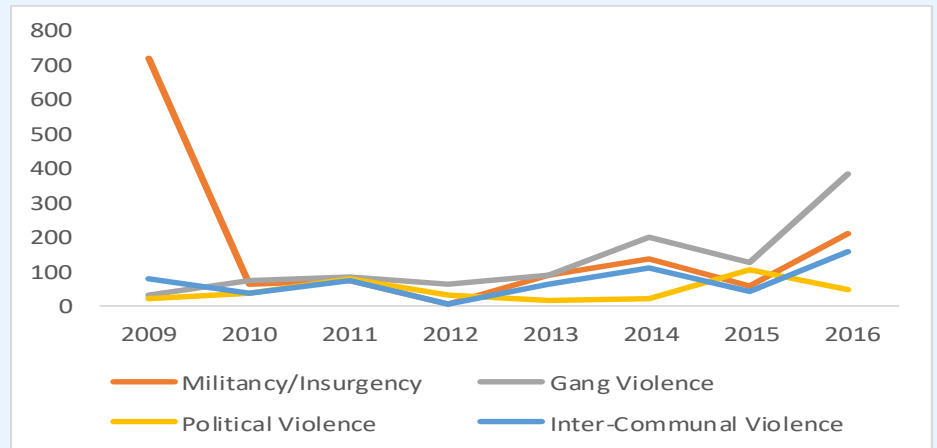
**Militancy in 2016 (8 States)**



Militancy in 2009 was concentrated in 4 states: Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, and a few incidents in Akwa Ibom.

Militancy in 2016 was spread across 8 states: Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, as well as Cross River, Imo, Ondo, and Abia.

**Figure 2: Lethal Violence in the Niger Delta 2009-2016**



Trend shows increased fatalities associated with militancy, communal, and cult violence in 2016. Data sources: Nigeria Watch [www.nigeriawatch.org](http://www.nigeriawatch.org) and [www.acleddata.com](http://www.acleddata.com) integrated on P4P Peace Map.

freeing of key figures seen as central to the movement as well as calls for restitution for environmental damage and development in the region.

In the current setting, however, the military operations that have been launched in several states in the Niger Delta have not had a similar effect. The unification of the various militant groups under one banner has not occurred and, in fact, various attempts at peace negotiations with different militants and the military operations have actually served to further

exacerbate tensions between and among groups, even those who were formally collaborative under the prior wave of militancy. When a spokesperson, claiming to speak on behalf of a group or geographical area emerges, they are just as quickly denounced by some who they claim to represent, as was seen late last year in Delta state.

## The Intersection of Key Conflict Drivers, Past and Present

A conflict landscape characterized by political patronage, ethnic rivalry, poor governance, and competition for resources—including land and economic benefits—has contributed to outbreaks of violence and general instability.

Membership in cult groups tends to overlap with criminal syndicates, political associations, youth associations, and ethnic militias. These gangs—which sometimes serve political patrons and sometimes ethno-nationalist interests—often fight amongst themselves, depending on their financial patron. In the first round of militancy, under the banner of MEND, these groups agreed to give each other space to conduct their respective activities and to target oil facilities and government assets, in distinct territories in Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta states.

In the current environment, by contrast, wars between cult groups have only escalated alongside militancy. This is in part due to the fragmentation of the political establishment. Cult groups depend on the patronage

of politicians for employment as informal security details or are used to intimidate, attack, or kill opponents. In the past, this political establishment was more monolithic under the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). With the unprecedented emergence of a credible opposition, the All Progressives Congress (APC), alliances and funding streams proliferated, destabilizing the equilibrium. This was evident in the Rivers and Bayelsa states' general and re-run elections in 2015 and 2016. For more on this, see [“Renewed Potential for Violence: Bayelsa Gubernatorial Elections”](#) or [“Rise in Cult Violence and Insecurity in Rivers State.”](#)

Additionally, the interplay between cultism, criminality, political patronage, election violence, and resource competition that are currently manifesting across the Niger Delta have far reaching implications for the future stability of the region. For example, many cult groups are either community-based or built around charismatic individuals who are believed to have overwhelming supernatural, economic, and political powers, and

thus serve as unifying forces for members. Individuals such as Ateke Tom, Asari Dokubo, Sobomabo Jackrich (Egberi-Papa), Farah Dagogo, and the late Soboma George are well-known figures in the region who have built cult groups around their powerful personalities. Such militant and cult leaders often garner enough political patronage to successfully vie for elections or access significant financial pay-outs from politicians who rely on their influence to help propel them into political office, often through violence and other forms of intimidation. As powerful cult leaders gain prominence in the Niger Delta, their wealth and influence offers unrivalled appeal to a multitude of unemployed and impoverished youth, potentially perpetuating their influence and power into another generation. Moreover, as these cult leaders rise from obscurity to prominence, it amplifies the dangerous implicit message that “violence pays,” while democratic processes, legitimate enterprise, and the rule of law seem poor substitutes.

## Implications

The current conflict landscape in the Niger Delta, and the onset of militancy in 2016, shares some similarities with the factors fuelling the insecurity that ended in 2009, but also differences. When considering potential paths to peace, these differences complicate the government's mitigating options. As noted above, the drop in global oil prices and the direct impacts that the militancy have had on the Nigerian economy has put severe budgetary constraints on the leadership in Abuja over the past several years. This has made it less likely that another Amnesty Programme of the scope and scale introduced in 2009 is financially possible. Even beyond the government's budgetary constraints, the differences between the various militant groups make it more difficult to obtain a widely-agreed upon peace arrangement through a mixture of financial incentives and direct investment in the region, as was done in 2009. Groups like the NDA, in an effort to appeal more

broadly to the grievances of other groups beyond, have only given rise to tensions among and between groups, in addition to already existing tensions between those groups and the local and national government. This has led to several aborted or inadequate attempts at ceasefires and peace dialogues that seem to break down within days or hours of being announced. The factors that managed to unite groups in 2009, have not had the same effect in 2016 to the present.

Perhaps due in part to the precedent set by Amnesty Programme and associated financial investments, everybody wants a seat at the table in any negotiation. This includes not only the NDA, but the Uhrobo's Niger Delta Green Justice Mandate in Delta state, the Bakassi Strike Force in Cross River, the Oyobio-Oyobio in Akwa Ibom, and the Adaka Boro Avengers in Bayelsa, to name a few.

The proliferation of these groups, and their attacks on energy infrastructure, has further led to international and national companies leaving the region, further fuelling unemployment, increasing poverty, and creating instability and insecurity into which cult groups and criminal gangs emerge to fill the vacuum. The 2016 crisis and the subsequent violence has also had further ranging regional impacts, including an uptick in weapons proliferation and an increase in maritime insecurity, with a rise in kidnapping and piracy on the Gulf of Guinea.

As of early 2017, and as documented in an article from Sahara Reporters on January 15, 2017, renewed calls for a dialogue between the Federal government and the armed groups in the region led to series of efforts, including a visit of the Vice President Yemi Osinbajo to the region. Another visit by Osinbajo to Delta state, scheduled for mid February, was announced in the Daily Trust

Newspaper on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017, where he reportedly was to meet with stakeholders from across the state, including the governor, traditional leaders, and youth groups. Although it appears that some of these initial efforts have led to fewer attacks in the region, questions over whether this renewed engagement represents merely a lull in the storm or an actual sustainable path forward remain largely unanswered.

## The Way Forward

Inasmuch as the conflict dynamics in the Niger Delta is a manifestation of interrelated drivers, stakeholders must adopt a systemic approach that holistically addresses the underlying structure and system that promotes violence and instability. If the militancy cannot be addressed in isolation, there needs to be a multi-layered approach. To the extent that violence entrepreneurs are more transactional than ideological, they seek to meet market demand, whether that be political, cultist, communal, or militant. Therefore, the problem needs to be addressed holistically.

First, it is critical that any action not incentivize more violence in the medium to long term. Economic development is key to addressing the root causes, but investment must not be done in a way that rewards violence or empowers spoilers.

Second, civil society needs to act to promote inter-ethnic solidarity from the grassroots up, perhaps by leveraging those who helped negotiate the resolution to crises in the past.

Third, more measures need to be taken to ensure that elections are credible and legitimate so that politicians cannot use cultists as thugs or further sanction them as legitimate power brokers.

Fourth, the Federal government needs to make a sustained effort to show goodwill in the Niger Delta to reduce the populist ap-

peal of opportunists like the NDA or others. The current initiative led by the Vice President is a step in the right direction.

To further efforts at prevention and mitigation, there must be a continued and amplified effort at tracking patterns and trends in violence systematically and in real-time, and communicating those findings to key stakeholders. In doing so, issues of communal, cultist, political, or militant conflict can be addressed by local actors at the community level before they escalate into more serious outbreaks of violence.

Groups like the Partners for Peace Network (P4P), the largest umbrella group of peace actors across the Niger Delta, have shown demonstrated success in engaging stakeholders for effective conflict early warning and response, using early warning data gathered through multiple platforms, including SMS. A network approach to conflict mitigation is key so that militant, communal, criminal, and political conflict can be addressed simultaneously at multiple levels.

Finally, without a commitment to good governance and provision of economic opportunities at the national and local levels, even the best efforts of peace actors will fail. Fresh thinking, informed by a new lens, on ways to address critical systemic threats to human security in the region is needed. This should range from addressing acute issues such as the proliferation of weapons, to the strengthening of a justice system that can punish perpetrators of cult violence and criminality, to innovative ways to engage youth before they fall under the sway of spoilers and their trade in the currency of violence.

The interrelatedness of conflict factors and complexity of the conflict landscape in the Niger Delta demands an approach that is dynamic and holistic. Without it, the cycle of insecurity that has gripped the region on and off for the better part of two decades will continue to re-emerge in one form or another.

## Timeline

- 1980s**
  - ⇒ Academic and advocacy groups known as 'confraternities' form in Nigerian Universities, including the Vikings
- 1990s**
  - ⇒ Driven by wave of militarisation, confraternities splinter into violent 'street wings', evolving into non-university membership
  - ⇒ Dewell, Debam and Icelanders form as splinter groups from the Vikings
- 2005**
  - ⇒ Loose alliance between cult groups and Ijaw organisations forms Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta
- 2009**
  - ⇒ Amnesty Program
- 2013**
  - ⇒ Emergence of the APC
  - ⇒ Member of the Icelanders splits from the group to form rival group the Greenlanders
  - ⇒ Armed clashes in December between Icelanders and Greenlanders lead to least 12 fatalities in Port Harcourt
- 2014**
  - ⇒ War between Icelanders and Greenlanders continues.
- 2015**
  - ⇒ Stockpiling of weapons by cult groups reported in January in Asari Toru ahead of elections
- 2016**
  - ⇒ Cult Violence Escalates
  - ⇒ Emergence of NDA and other new militant groups