

# Organized Crime in the Niger Delta: Implications for the 2019 Elections

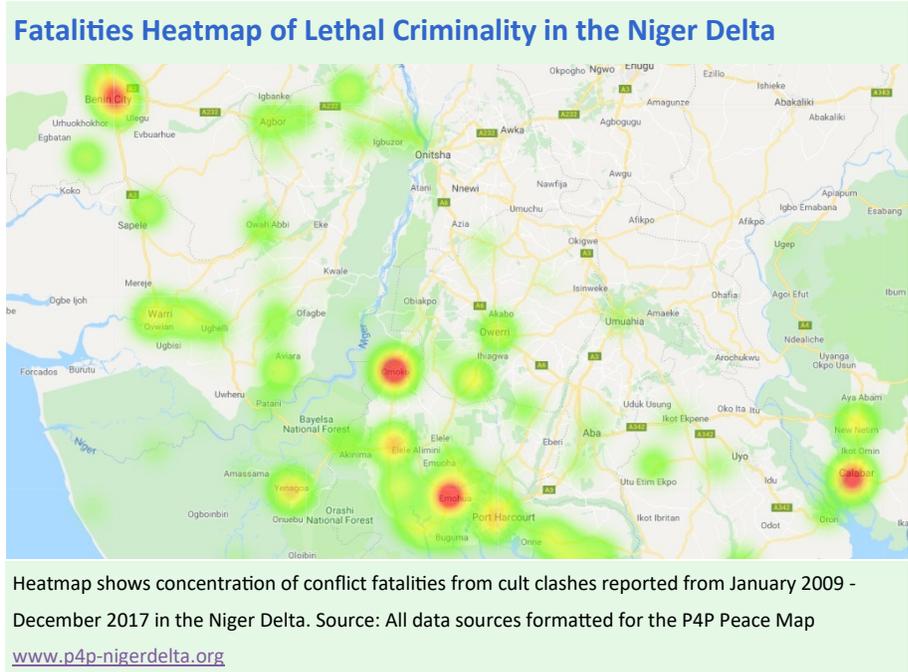
## Conflict Briefing: April 2018

In the Niger Delta region, organized crime manifests most visibly as supremacy clashes between cult groups such as the Icelanders and Greenlanders, or Deywell versus Deybam. Over the past decade, such clashes have killed over 1000 people and have further complicated an already challenging operating environment for businesses.

Despite the uniqueness of the Niger Delta context, organized crime in the region shares traits often found in other parts of the world. For example, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), it most often flourishes in environments characterized by significant internal divisions, depleted infrastructure, high poverty rates, and group or sub-group hostility towards the state. No stranger to cycles of electoral violence, militancy, criminality and communal clashes, many of the Niger Delta states face challenges associated with rule of law and governance that enable an environment of impunity.

Further feeding a cycle of instability, organized crime undermines governments, fuels corruption, and facilitates criminal infiltration of state structures. It also exploits and deepens societal divisions, keeping grievances alive while undermining peace processes. Organized crime also weakens state-society relations by undermining stability, eroding trust and legitimacy, and fostering the creation of parallel or compromised state and local security services. According to the 2017 World Bank Annual Report, and similar findings from a 2016 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on illicit cash flows, these factors result in disincentives for economic investment and growth.

In the Niger Delta, organized crime is often intertwined with, and feeds off of, other known conflict drivers. These



include: communal violence, militancy, and general political violence, especially around elections. Peace and security actors in the Niger Delta have developed effective tools for addressing political violence (civic education, strategic communication, and peace messaging), communal/sectarian violence (community engagement, conflict mediation and arbitration), and militancy (high-level negotiations and development strategies). Organized crime, however mainly manifested as cultism in the Niger Delta, presents a particularly difficult challenge for peace actors, both in terms of addressing cultism itself, as well as complicating efforts to address the other conflict dynamics.

For conflict mitigation to be successful, the approach must treat organized crime as a cross-cutting factor in all interventions, whether they are focused primarily on resolving communal and political tensions, or ethno-nationalist grievances and concerns. Otherwise,

cultists will undermine peacebuilding efforts and ensure that in the long run, they fail.

Looking ahead to the election in 2019, this is especially important, as social cohesion is stressed across a range of fault lines causing the environment to become more conducive to violence entrepreneurs.

This conflict briefing provides a snapshot of the trends and patterns of organized criminality and political violence in the Niger Delta, and examines the security and conflict risk implications of organized criminality on the upcoming 2019 general elections in the region. An understanding of the dynamics of security and conflict risk, and the related impact on peace and stability, allows stakeholders to proactively address emerging conflict risk rather than only reactively responding to incidents. This brief draws on data available on the P4P Peace Map ([www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/peace-building-map](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/peace-building-map)).

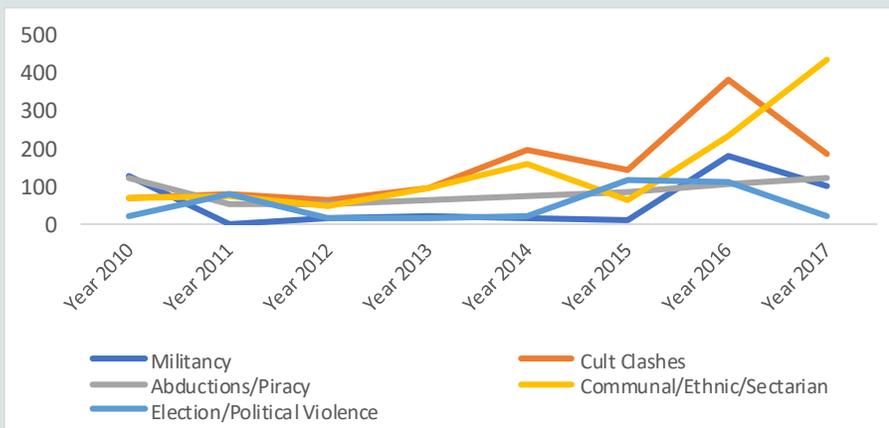
**Figure 1: Annual Fatalities, Niger Delta (2010 - 2017)**

Figure 1: Reported fatalities in the Niger Delta from 2009—2017  
 Sources: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map  
[www.p4p-nigerdelta.org](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org)

## Organized Crime: An Opportunistic Venture

Organized crime, predominately manifested as cultism in the Niger Delta, flourishes in environments experiencing communal, militant, and political violence. Similar to a parasite that takes advantage of a weakened host, cult groups in the Niger Delta utilize the chaos and discontent caused by the growth of intercommunal, political, and other types of violence for both short- and long-term economic gains. Their business model takes advantage of (and exacerbates) societal cleavages and mistrust between the government and local populations, not only by providing parallel systems of commerce, but also stepping into the role of security for hire.

For example, in facilitating the trafficking of weapons to aggrieved groups in the Niger Delta, or into and out of the sub-region, cultists undermine the legitimate monopoly on the use of force by the state. In offering their services to ethnic groups and political parties, as well as by playing the role of middleman between these groups and others, especially oil smugglers and pirates, they further provide opportunities for illicit profit while fueling instability. Thus, in order to protect

their business model, cult groups act as spoilers in efforts to mitigate any type of conflict in isolation, by leveraging pre-existing networks and manipulating grievances to stay ahead of peace and security actors.

## Organized Crime: The 2011 & 2015 Elections

Political tensions and violence were sharply elevated in both the lead-up to and the aftermath of the 2011 and 2015 elections. Broadly speaking, violence entrepreneurs such as cult groups, profited from the chaotic environment created by political dynamics.

Cult groups were active during both the 2011 federal and gubernatorial election period. While not always explicitly connected to political parties, clashes between rival groups in supremacy battles underscores the history of these groups in fueling violence and undermining stability by utilizing networks and group affiliations.

Data uploaded to the P4P Peace Map includes several incidents related to cult and political violence during these election periods. For example, in August 2011, two cult groups, the Greenlanders

and the Icelanders, clashed in the lead-up to gubernatorial elections in Yenagoa LGA in Bayelsa. According to reports, the Greenlanders were associated with the Labour Party (LP) and the Icelanders were affiliated with the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Another cult group, the Vikings, were also involved in the violence, which resulted in 15 fatalities. In December 2011, one cult group reportedly attacked a rival group, resulting in five fatalities in Ondo East LGA. Both groups were allegedly connected to local politicians in Ondo. In September 2012, suspected cultists killed four people after the inauguration of PDP ward executives. In October, cultists reportedly attacked a LP campaign rally, increasing tensions between political groups in Akoko South-West LGA in Ondo.

In the 2015 election season, political tensions were again sharply elevated in the run-up to the March federal election, the April gubernatorial elections, and the May local elections. The 2015 elections saw the rise and ultimate victory of a stronger opposition party, as Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) defeated the sitting President Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in the federal election. While, on the surface, this was indicative of deepening political democratization in Nigeria, it simultaneously also created a broader marketplace for violence entrepreneurs.

Reports of cult violence in the Niger Delta have been on the rise since 2015, peaking in 2016. Data uploaded to the P4P Peace Map includes multiple incidents of clashes between cult groups and attacks on political opponents. In the lead-up to, and the aftermath of, the 2015 elections, cult groups were actively recruited and co-opted by political parties to propagate violence for profit. For example, in April 2015, rival cult groups reportedly clashed at a polling center, resulting in one fatality. Violence then continued between the two groups after the election. Other incidents include reports of political

parties employing cult groups to attack political opposition groups.

The data also included multiple reports of supremacy battles and clashes between rival cult groups during this time. For example, in January 2015, the Icelanders and the Greenlanders fought over oil bunkering, resulting in one fatality.

The political dimension of cult violence has continued even after election-related tensions began to decline in the Niger Delta. For example, the continuing close relationship between cult groups and other forms of violence can be seen in a February 2017 incident report in Ondo State, where clashes between two cult groups resulted in four fatalities. The clash was reportedly triggered when defectors from a political party were rebuffed when they tried to rejoin the political party's cult group. In December, a large group of suspected cultists attacked Ondo's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) office, killing one person and injuring several others. The attack was reportedly motivated

by the non-release of election materials to the opposition party, the APC.

Organized crime in the region has also taken on other dimensions, notably piracy and abductions. For example, in December 2017, suspected pirates and cult members killed two people and injured a policeman in Bayelsa. The data includes numerous incidents of kidnapping perpetrated by various cult groups in the Niger Delta. Another example, from May 2016, involved suspected members of the Deybam cult group, who allegedly killed five people and kidnapped two others in Rivers State. The victims were reportedly members of the Icelander cult group. As recently as February 2018, a youth leader was kidnapped by suspected members of the Icelander cult group. The examples indicate that the growth of organized crime in the region can have direct effects on peace and security in the lead-up to the 2019 presidential and gubernatorial elections.

## Organized Crime & Election Cycles

According to data uploaded to the P4P Peace Map, incidents of cult violence, including reports of piracy and abductions, have occurred in all nine Niger Delta States.

Considering that organized crime thrives in an environment fraught with political and social fissures, it is perhaps not surprising that the most lethal spike in cult violence occurred in Rivers State in 2016, just as a series of polarizing state and local elections were taking place. Often there was an explicit link between criminality and political violence. For example, in August 2011, 15 people were reportedly killed in a clash between members of the Greenlander and Icelander cult groups in Kolokuma/Opokuma LGA in Bayelsa. The cult groups were thought to be sponsored by supporters of two rival political parties in the state. Abductions have also occasionally had a political dimension. In Bayelsa during the 2015 election period, five members of the PDP were kidnapped by suspected

**Fatalities from Cult Violence, Niger Delta States**

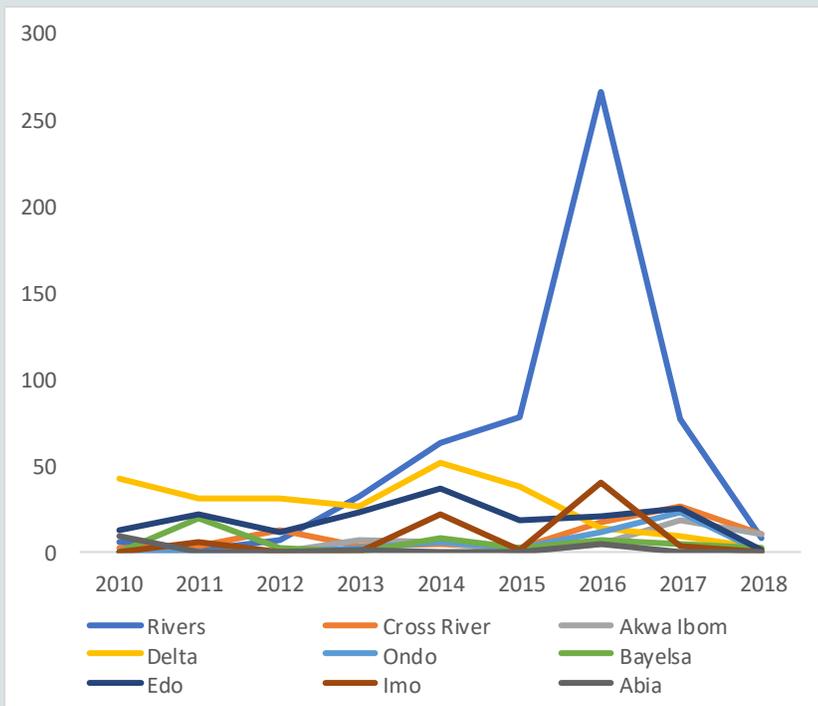


Figure 2: Reported fatalities from cult/gang violence in the Niger Delta, January 2010 - March 2018. Sources: Nigeria Watch data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map ([www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/))

**All Conflict Fatalities by State (2010 - 2018)**

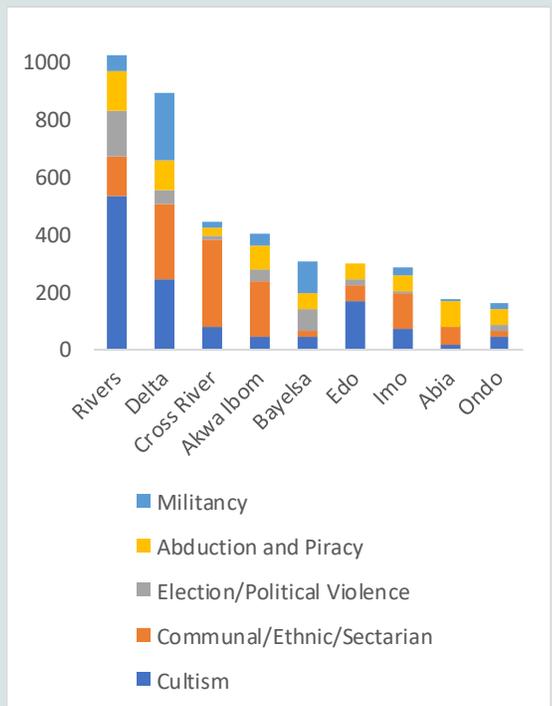


Figure 3: Fatalities by type and state: January 2010 - March 2018. Sources: All data sources integrated on the P4P Peace Map ([www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/))

pirates in Brass LGA.

Other examples of cultism and criminal violence didn't have an obvious link to political tensions. For example, between January and February 2016, dozens were killed in rival cult clashes in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni and Emohua LGAs of Rivers State. In 2017, a university student was killed in July during a violent clash between two rival cult groups in Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa. Also in Bayelsa in September 2017, pirates killed two boat passengers and, in a separate incident, reportedly killed two policemen and an operative of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC). In Delta State in May of the same year, four marine policemen were allegedly killed in an incident involving an oil bunkering deal in Warri North LGA. The victims were believed to be involved in the deal and were killed to exclude them from the proceeds. In Warri South West LGA, gunmen attacked the Gbaramatu Traditional Council's speedboat, robbing its occupants, including two prominent traditional chiefs. This incident reportedly has led to increased tensions in Delta State.

## Looking Ahead to 2019

The aftermath of the 2015 presidential elections represented one of the most violent periods in the Niger Delta since the end of the 2009 militancy. This has had lasting implications for communities and businesses alike. Now, looking forward to the 2019 elections in the region, the stakes for violence and their impacts remain high.

In the lead-up to 2019, peace and security actors must approach peacebuilding efforts in an integrated way that takes the risks of cult groups into serious consideration alongside the other conflict dynamics such as communal and political cleavages. As cult

groups begin jockeying for influence and increasingly attempt to demonstrate their ability to monopolize violence in specific LGAs and communities, it is critical to get ahead of the curve. Once organized crime takes hold in an area, it becomes difficult to root out, and has the potential to make conflict management much more difficult, even as related to political and communal violence. In acknowledging cultism as the preeminent manifestation of organized crime in the Niger Delta, and mainstreaming it across all interventions, it may be possible to get ahead of the curve.

## A Way Forward

To get ahead of organized criminal violence and its subsequent manifestations of political violence during election cycles in the Niger Delta, an early and comprehensive engagement strategy is needed. For example, peace and security agents should consider convening multi-stakeholder dialogues in the Niger Delta to bring together key actors and explore the burgeoning conflict trends highlighted in this briefing.

PIND, through the P4P Network, has already convened similar dialogues in communities afflicted by cult-related violence in Rivers and Imo states. In Bayelsa state, ahead of the 2015 gubernatorial elections, the P4P Network also convened key stakeholder groups, with a focus on youth - who are often coopted early by cultists and criminal groups. P4P employed a multi-pronged engagement strategy that included dialogue and targeted media campaigns. The strategy not only succeeded in informing communities about the dynamics behind cult- and election-related violence, but it also induced the leadership of potential spoiler groups to sign a pledge

of non-violence during the elections and in their aftermath. In all cases, early engagement was key, as was the inclusion of often overlooked or marginalized groups, including youth and women. While there is no "one size fits all" blueprint for mitigating the potential effects of organized criminal violence, there are examples of previous successful efforts that might inform such a strategy.

Finally, in examining the role of organized criminal violence in the Niger Delta, as manifested most directly through cultism, it is paramount to understand its cross-cutting nature in order to successfully mitigate its effects. While prior efforts have often treated cultism, militancy, political violence and communal violence as separate dynamics, fueled by distinct and discrete entities, interests, and ideologies, this can no longer be the default assumption. Community leaders and political actors need the awareness, ability, and will to reject cooptation by criminal elements no matter how tantalizing it may appear in the short term to monopolize the use of violence for political and monetary gains.

One way for peacebuilding actors to encourage this is to empower the widest possible range of stakeholders through training, dialogues, and engagement, especially women and youth. Early engagement, informed as much as possible by local level data, should inform a comprehensive strategy to amplify the voices of a wide range of leaders across the Niger Delta and to thereby weaken those who may seek to use violence for political and monetary gains. Only by taking a proactive and holistic approach to the problem of organized crime and violence entrepreneurs in the Niger Delta can a repeat of the violence of 2015 be avoided in 2019.

Contributors: Nkasi Wodu, Afeno Odomovo