

# Rise in Cult Violence and Insecurity in Rivers State

Briefing: November 2015

Reports of cult violence have increased sharply in the Niger Delta since the beginning of 2014. This has been particularly salient in Rivers State, where the violence has been spread over a wide geographic region. In Rivers, as in other Niger Delta states, cult violence has taken on various criminal, militant, communal, and/or political undertones, depending on the situation. In 2015 for instance, incidents included a major clash between rival cult groups Deywell and Deebam in the northern Local Government Area (LGA) of Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni that killed as many as 16 people in July. There was also a reported clash between rival cult groups Greenlanders and Icelanders in the southern LGA of Degema; and political intimidation by cult groups such as the Icelanders and Greenlanders between January and April in the central LGA of Port Harcourt, the south eastern LGA of Andoni, and elsewhere. Given how pervasive the issue has become, for any program that seeks to mitigate conflict in the state, cultism will have to be a key consideration in the coming year as Rivers goes through significant socio-political changes presenting both opportunities and risks to sustainable peace and development.

## Background

Cult violence has been a regular feature in the Rivers State socio-political setting for more than two decades. According to a

report by the Fund for Peace in December 2012 titled, 'Nigeria: Beyond Terror and Militants,' confraternities were initially formed in the 1950's at universities for the purposes of promoting relationships and bonds between and among various students for social and economic advocacy and activism. Many of these groups focused on the promotion of social and political principles, including resistance to colonialism and discriminatory, sexist, or unfair university policies.

From the late 1980's to the mid-1990's, a wave of militarization occurred among confraternities against the backdrop of a broader militarization of society, particularly in Rivers and other key Niger Delta states. Contributing to this trend of militarization was a growing perception that peaceful methods of advocacy and mobilization around issues of economic justice and representative governance were yielding limited results. Thus, the use of violence and intimidation as political tools were increasingly embraced and many confraternities began to evolve into what has become the cult group phenomenon of today.

As noted in the April 2015 book, 'Violence in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends,' by Patricia Taft and Nate Haken, militants saw confraternities as a useful means to confront and threaten opposing groups, and began funnelling money and weapons into their ranks, leading them to become

## Rivers State, Nigeria



This briefing outlines the background and historical significance of confraternities in the Niger Delta, and the emergence of cult groups as a result in Rivers State. It summarizes the recent trends in violence and insecurity linked to the many active cult groups in the State, 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.*



increasingly predatory and violent. Cult-related violence peaked in the mid-1990s, spreading rapidly to the streets as well as the creeks through militarized wings of the confraternities and breakaway factions.

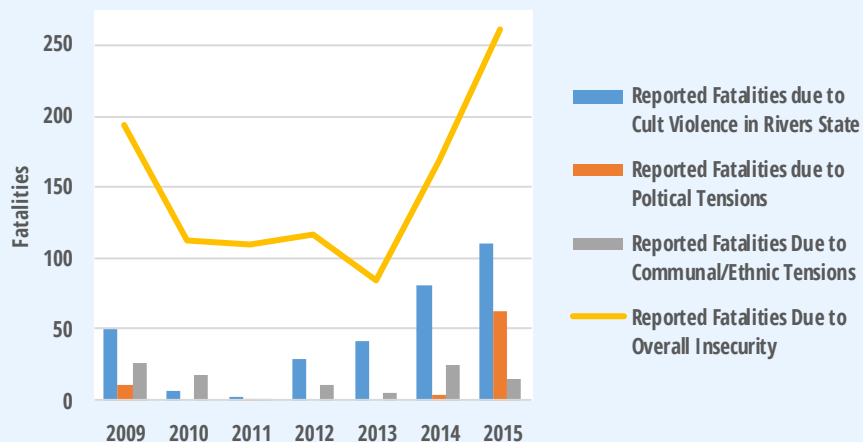
In the 2007 elections, according to a report by Human Rights Watch from October of that year, wealthy patrons emerged as “Cult Godfathers,” who provided money and weapons to groups during election seasons for intimidation and thuggery. Cult groups began being hired by crime syndicates to provide onsite security and administer criminal routes, leading them to become deeply enmeshed in the illegal oil bunkering market, as well as in the drugs and weapons trade. Cult gangs became highly active within neighbourhoods and communities, often recruiting youths to their ranks to help defend and expand their territory.

In Rivers State in particular, cults have served as a gateway to all kinds of criminality and violence, including militancy. These groups and networks of groups have wide geographical penetration in the state and are heavily armed. In Rivers, as well as other states, cult groups overlap with street gangs, criminal syndicates, youth associations, and other militias. From the more notorious Deebam, Deywell, Greenlanders and Icelanders, to the lesser known Doctor’s Squad, Italians, Blood Hunters, Junior Vikings, Bermudas and others, cult groups have proliferated in Rivers State with reach into the communities of Emohua, Ikwerre, Khana, Ogba Egbema Ndoni, Ahoada and the Kalabari and Okrika villages.

### Patterns of Insecurity

Since the 2009 Presidential Amnesty program went into effect, 2015 has represented the most violent year in Rivers State. As outlined in the above right graph, 2015 had the highest number of reported fatalities in the past six years. Violence perpetrated by suspected cultists makes up a significant proportion of those incidents.

### Reported Fatalities in Rivers State



Trend shows a significant rise in reported cult-related fatalities between 2012 and 2015 in Rivers State. This is consistent with an overall rise in insecurity in Rivers, which has seen a steady increase in fatalities since 2013. By comparison, reported political and communal/ethnic related fatalities have both been notably lower than cult related fatalities.

Data source: Nigeria Watch [www.nigeriawatch.org](http://www.nigeriawatch.org)

### Nexus Between Rivers Politics and Cultism

Political tensions in 2015 were sharply elevated in Rivers State in the run-up to the March federal election, the April gubernatorial elections, and the May local elections. Based on Peace Map analysis of Nigeria Watch data, political tensions far exceeded ethnic/communal tensions during the period.

As noted in the publications cited above and consistent with recent Peace Map and IPDU research findings, cult violence tends to escalate during the election cycle. This is typically because many cult groups depend on the patronage of politicians, who either employ them as informal security or use them to intimidate, attack or kill their opponents. Due to the political underpinnings of cult violence, many cult groups are either community-based or built around certain charismatic individuals who serve as rallying points for members. In addition to community-based groups and those built around certain individuals or groups of individuals (including ex-militant leaders), there are also what is known as ‘feeder groups’. These are associations that

may have direct or indirect affiliations with the more prominent groups in the state.

Furthermore, many of the hotbeds of cult violence are located in centres of political activities such as the state capital of Port Harcourt and other local government headquarters, as indicated in the heat map on page 3 of this briefing. The emergence of known ex-agitators and cult leaders in the current Rivers State House of Assembly suggests a further linkage between the struggle for political power and cult violence in the state.

Gang violence and cult clashes have also been observed in connection to oil bunkering and illegal refining activities. There were multiple reported incidents of clashes between rival cult groups over issues such as access to illegal bunkering camps, royalties from oil businesses, and job opportunities provided by oil companies in Ikwerre, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Port Harcourt and Okrika LGAs. Communities in LGAs such as Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Akuku-Toru, Asari-Toru, Degema, Eleme and Port Harcourt have been witnessing increasing cult and gang related violence.

## Cult-Related Incidents by LGA

The following summaries highlight cult-related violence in some of the key LGAs in Rivers State during 2015. The incidents were reported in on the online Peace Map ([www.p4p-nigerdelta.org](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org)) and the IPDU SMS Early Warning Platform.

### Asari Toru

Reported cult-related violence in 2015 included robbery, stockpiling of weapons, and political thuggery during the elections.

### Degema

Reported cult-related violence in 2015 included a clash between Greenlanders and Icelanders over oil bunkering, which allegedly resulted in one fatality. In a separate incident, a cultist was reportedly beaten up in a political dispute.

### Eleme

In April two people were killed in a clash suspected to be between the Deebam and Deywell cult groups. Then in July, as many as fifteen people were reportedly killed when cultists shot indiscriminately into a market place.

### Etche

In January, the rivalry between the Deebam and Deywell cult groups had been elevated in the LGA when three cultists were killed in a clash, leading to increased communal tensions in the area.

### Ikwerre

In July there was reported to be a clash between the Dewell and Axelander cult groups that killed three.

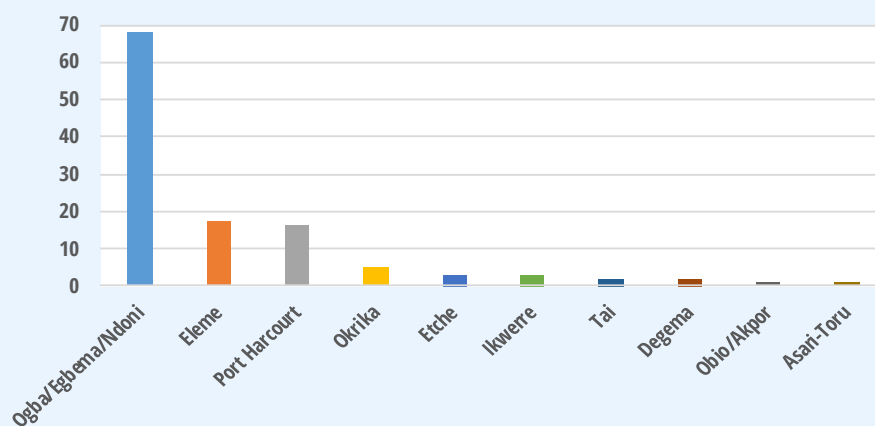
### Obio/Akpor

In January, two cult groups allegedly clashed, although there were no fatalities reported.

### Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni

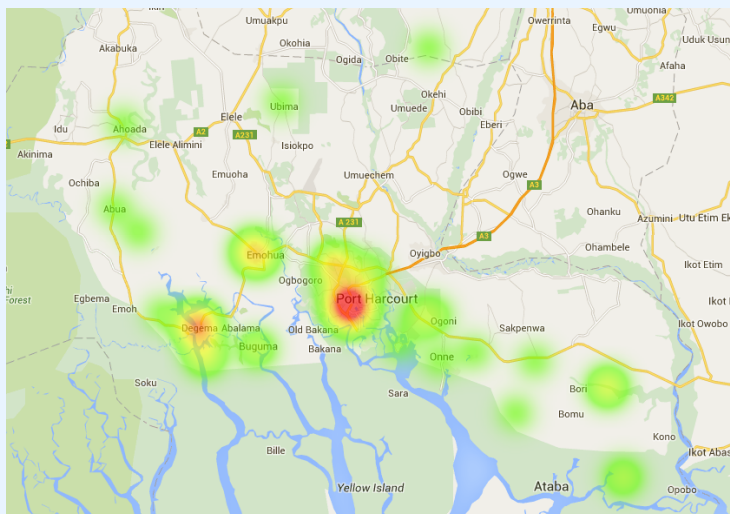
With as many as 68 people killed so far this year as a result of cult activities, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni was the most violent LGA in Rivers state. In May, police reportedly engaged cultists in a gun battle, killing over 20 of them. Two months later, in July, there was a reported clash between Deywell and Deebam cult groups that killed 18. In September, another clash between cult groups reportedly killed another 17.

## Cult-Related Fatalities by LGA in Rivers State



Trend shows that Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni has the highest levels of cult violence reported for 2015, with 68 fatalities reported since January. Eleme has the second highest tally in cult-related fatalities, driven by the Deebam and Deywell cult group clashes.

Data source: Nigeria Watch [www.nigeriawatch.org](http://www.nigeriawatch.org)



Heat Map: Hot spots for reported cult-related incidents from 2009 to 2015 in Rivers State.

The graphic above is a Heat Map (screenshot) of incidents reported using Nigeria Watch Data — [www.p4p-nigerdelta.org](http://www.p4p-nigerdelta.org).

### Okrika

In February, cultists and armed gangs reportedly attacked party supporters during a campaign rally and killed a police officer and stabbed a news media personnel. Then in July in attack that was believed to be cult-related, a clash between two communities reportedly killed five.

### Tai

In July it was reported that two people were killed during a cult clash in a community.

### Port Harcourt

Although it didn't have the highest number of fatalities reported in the state, as a result of cult violence, Port Harcourt had by far the highest number of incidents in 2015. These included robbery, kidnappings, killings (eg. of an ex-militant, four men in a restaurant, and several people in a bar), as well as several reports of political intimidation in the run-up to the elections. There were also reported conflicts over the control of an oil bunkering camp and revenue from banana dealers.

## Key Cult Groups in Rivers State

### The Vikings

The Supreme Vikings Confraternity also called the Norsemen Klub of Nigeria, was formed at the University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State in 1982 with the mission to promote unity and brotherhood on campus and the betterment of society overall. Even today, the group maintains that its objectives are peaceful. During an interview conducted by Roy Chikwem for Nigeriaworld in October 2008, a high ranking leader in the confraternity said that their mission was to,

*"fight for and defend the oppressed and the weak. Our organization adopts corrective and protective measures for the defense of the masses against social injustice, victimization, and deprivation. The fundamental mission is to assemble men in the course of re-enactment of the Vikings, develop leadership, promote brotherhood, and provide service to humanity."*

However, when a wave of militarization swept through confraternities across Nigeria in the 1990s, three splinter groups emerged from the Vikings. As Bestman Wellington described in his 2007 paper for the Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor (Vol. 5, No. 8), these splinter groups were the 'Junior Vikings', also known as the Deewell, the Deebam, and the Icelanders. Unlike the original Vikings, these groups were not bound by university code or a formal power structure. Thus, they were able to expand their influence outside of campus and into surrounding communities.

### Deebam

Organized crime and racketeering have become typical activities for Deebam to offset expensive membership dues, according to Bestman Wellington in his 2007 paper. Wellington also asserts that the group's influence in Emuoha LGA of Rivers is so profound that it has extended into the political sphere. Before his death in 2007, a prominent Deebam member was known to work for the People's Democratic Party (PDP), with the group also tied to election

rigging in exchange for money. Wellington notes that violence involving the Deebam usually occurs when individuals fail to pay bribes, or when clashes with rival cult groups, such as the Deewell.

### Deewell

Like Deebam, members of Deewell were not university-affiliated when they splintered from the Vikings. As Wellington describes, many of the Deewell members were already involved in petty crime and were known for their participation in territorial street brawls using broken bottles, machetes and locally-manufactured guns. According to an interview conducted by Wellington in April 2005 with a former cult commander, the Deewell lacked the resources of other cult groups, and as a result were ineffective against its rival the Deebam. Thus, another splinter group, the Icelanders was formed, and in the process helped to consolidate the power of the Deebam. This is consistent with other local media accounts such as nairaland.com.

### The Icelanders

The Icelanders have represented one of the most violent groups in the Niger Delta region, as described in a 2008 Human Rights Watch report on Rivers State titled 'Politics as War'. The report suggested in the 2003 election won by the PDP, the Icelanders' leader Akele Tom exerted political influence. The report also suggested political racketeering was one of the ways for the Icelanders to generate revenue. The Icelanders are also known for attacks on energy infrastructure which have occurred regularly since the early 2000s. In 2014 clashes with the Greenlanders, a number of fatalities were reported in local media such as the Naijagists.com blog on September 17, 2014.

### The Greenlanders

In 2013, a member of the Icelanders Mr. Nengi Ikiba split from the group to form the

## Cult Group Emergence in Rivers

### 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
- ⇒ Deewell, Deebam & Icelanders form as splinter groups from the Vikings

### 2005

- ⇒ Loose alliance between cult groups & other militant organizations forms Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta

### 2013

- ⇒ Member of the Icelanders splits from the group to form rival group the Greenlanders
- ⇒ Armed clashes in December between Icelanders & Greenlanders lead to least 12 fatalities

### 2015

- ⇒ Cult groups reportedly engage in political thuggery & intimidation during the presidential & gubernatorial election campaigns
- ⇒ Clashes between Deebam & Deewell reportedly kill as many as two dozen.

Greenlanders, due to "irreconcilable differences" as reported in local news sources such as pointblanknews.com on July 1st, 2013. The Greenlanders have since expanded their territory into areas in both Rivers and Bayelsa states. The group's political influence in Bayelsa is also strong as Mr. Ikiba ran for the Bayelsa House of Assembly in 2011 and for the Ijaw Youth Council in 2013. However, in 2013, he was arrested and subsequently confessed to charges of cultism according to news source saharareporters.com on July 4th, 2013.

Clashes over disputed territory in Rivers State with the Icelanders have been numerous and violent. In September 2014, clashes between the two groups killed ten people according to news source Naijagists.com, and consistent with incident reports on the P4P Peacemap.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

### Conclusion

Political tension in Rivers State is not the only contributing factor exacerbating cult violence. As described in this brief, other factors include protection rackets, competition over contracts, and control of illicit criminal enterprises such as oil bunkering operations. However, in early 2014, the political environment became sharply polarised, when then-Governor Chibuike Amaechi and a host of his supporters decamped to the All Progressives Congress (APC). The electoral campaign that preceded the elections was characterized by violence, including political killings, arson, kidnapping, hate speech, violent confrontation, and destruction of properties. This led to a situation where many cultists began taking sides.

The botched local government elections held in May 2015 and the subsequent appointment of caretaker committees have further polarised the state, making it ripe for violent confrontation at the community level. The rescheduled elections in the state following recent decision of the election tribunal that annulled the election of the incumbent governor, as well as the sacking of the Speaker of the State House of Assembly and 20 other members of the House, are potential conflict triggers in the state. The trend and timeline of violence indicates that the planned re-run election remains a potential trigger of violence that requires urgent attention from all stakeholders in the state.

Meanwhile, there is the perception that cultists who sided with those who turned out to be the electoral winners enjoy a degree of influence and impunity that they may not have had previously. These cultists also have a stake in the outcome of current and future political disputes.

Cultists are not always criminals, or violent. Sometimes they are more like confraterni-

ties than syndicates. And it is a good thing when those who were criminals put aside their criminality and engage constructively in the political system to achieve change for the public good. However, if in the process, the political system itself becomes criminalized, then violence increasingly becomes the norm in the political sphere.

Those in the private and public sectors with a stake in peace must work together to ensure that Rivers State does not slide back into a climate of worsening insecurity. There is a window of opportunity for all stakeholders to come together and promote economic growth and peaceable livelihoods for the state as a whole.

### Recommendations

#### To the Government:

- Engage at-risk youths in economic programs that will give them a source of livelihoods and keep them from being susceptible to being hired as criminals or thugs.
- Hold accountable those who engage in hate speech, criminality and political thuggery.
- Focus security efforts not just on the protection of state assets and infrastructure, but also on broad-based human security, so as to promote an environment of social well-being as a foundation for development.

#### To the Media:

- Cover news events fairly and accurately so that the public will be well-informed for effective advocacy and civic action.
- Do not inflame tensions with incomplete, imbalanced, or sensationalist content.
- Celebrate peace builders in the media so as to encourage a culture of peace.
- Partner with civil society organizations to promote peace education and peace messages.

#### To the Political Parties:

- Do not use cultists or other at-risk youths as "informal security" or political thugs.
- Encourage members to engage in constructive criticism of government policies; publicly and repeatedly repudiate the use of all forms of hate speech and political violence.

#### To the Security Agencies:

- Prioritize the mitigation of cultism as part of a strategic plan for the state, given the high level of cult-related violence in comparison with other types.
- Do not allow politicians to employ militants and cultists for informal security.
- Let there be zero tolerance for abuses by any security officer. Building public trust in the security apparatus will go a long way towards ensuring the necessary cooperation and information sharing with the communities you serve.
- For the same reason, avoid any perception of political bias. In a politically charged environment, the security agencies need to be relied upon by citizens of all political persuasions.

#### To the Civil Society Organizations:

- Get involved in peacebuilding platforms such as the Partners for Peace Network, so as to build a culture of peace.
- Link early warning efforts with conflict assessment, advocacy, conflict management, and peace building. No single individual or organization can do this alone.
- Partner with media to promote peace education and peace messages.
- Report any verified incident of conflict risk to the IPDU SMS early warning system at 080.9936.2222. Please indicate the state, LGA, and date of incident in your text message as well as a brief description.