

# Enter the Dragon? Chinese Oil Companies & Resistance in the Niger Delta

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**This article explores the ramifications of the entry of Chinese state oil companies into the volatile Niger Delta for the politics of local resistance in the region – until recently, virtually the preserve of Western oil multinationals and smaller Independents. The entry of Chinese oil companies in the context of a ‘new’ scramble for Africa’s resources, and as a response to strategic moves by the Nigerian petro-state and ruling elite to increase oil revenues, and diversify its near-total dependence on Western actors, oil technology, markets and conditionalities, has drawn a quick response from the local communities in the Niger Delta. On 29 April 2006, an Ijaw youth militia, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), exploded a car bomb in the city of Warri, warning the Chinese oil companies to stay away from the Niger Delta, and further threatening that they would be treated as ‘thieves’ and attacked. Since then, there have been reports of the kidnapping and subsequent release of some Chinese oil workers in the region.**

**What is the potential impact of the entry of Chinese oil capital on the fragile oil environment and the human rights situation in this volatile oil-rich region? Does the existing evidence suggest a fundamental difference in local responses to Chinese and Western oil capital in the Niger Delta? What explanations can be advanced for the local response to the entry of Chinese oil companies in the Niger Delta? The paper also analyzes the likely response of the Chinese oil companies to the perceived threat(s) that local resistance in the Niger Delta could pose to their extractive, profit and energy security interests, given their antecedents in other African new oil states, particularly Sudan, where Chinese companies or Chinese oil workers were targeted by rebels, and were deeply involved with the state and dominant elite in mining oil and repressing local resistance. This assumes further significance in the securitization of the Niger Delta’s oil within the context of a post-9/11 US-led (militarised) energy security paradigm that has placed the region in the context of an energy-rich Gulf of Guinea, which is central to Western global strategic interests. While demonstrating that a clear anti-Chinese oil position does not as yet exist in the Niger Delta, the article critically examines the prospects for the future of the forces and trajectories of local resistance in the Niger Delta.**

## Introduction

On 29 April 2006, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) detonated a car bomb close to the Warri oil refinery in the western part of the volatile oil-rich Niger Delta. The explosion coincided with the visit of the Chinese President Hu Jintao to Nigeria, and the granting of four oil drilling licences valued at \$4 billion to Chinese oil companies and appeared to send a clear message to the latest entrant into the globalised plunder of the Niger Delta's oil. In a statement sent by email to media organisations around the world, MEND noted:

*'We wish to warn the Chinese government and its oil companies to steer well clear of the Niger Delta' [and added for chilling effect that], 'The Chinese government by investing in stolen crude places its citizens in our line of fire' (BBC News, 2006; China Daily, 2006).*

This event and the subsequent abduction of nine Chinese National Petroleum Company workers (on contract, conducting seismic work for Nigerian Agip Oil Corporation – a subsidiary of Italian ENI), at Sagbama, Bayelsa state<sup>1</sup> by an unidentified armed group (Olaniyi, 2007a; China View, 2007), raised concerns about the implications of these attacks for the politics of local resistance in the Niger Delta. That resistance, since the 1990s, involved growing opposition to the predatory activities of the Western Oil multinationals: Shell, Chevron Texaco, Exxon Mobil, Total and Agip-ENI, working in partnership with the Nigerian state to exploit and pollute the oil-rich, but impoverished region. This article explores the ramifications of the entry of Chinese oil companies: Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Chinese National Offshore Corporation (CNOOC) and Sinopec in the context of a 'new' scramble for Africa's resources and for the politics of local resistance in the Niger Delta. This location has long been regarded as the exclusive preserve of Western oil multinationals after Shell began operations there over half a century ago.

The entry of Chinese oil companies into the Niger Delta is driven by China's quest to diversify its dependence on oil from the Middle East. It is also driven by the profit from the lucrative international oil trade, an increased influence in Nigeria and attempts to provide stable oil supplies to its rapidly industrialising economy. China has become the world's second largest importer of crude oil (for 30 per cent of its energy needs) after the United States. On the part of the Nigerian faction of the transnational capitalist elite and President Obasanjo's government, the invitation to the Chinese was part of an effort to broaden the global base of oil accumulation in the Niger Delta. It also wanted to increase oil revenues and leverage its bargaining power over the various western oil companies and foreign state oil corporations that dominate the Nigerian oil industry, and are struggling for increased access to the strategic oil resources of the Niger Delta region.

It is therefore important to raise critical questions about why the entry of the Chinese into the 'oil scramble' has drawn a quick response from certain forces in the Niger Delta.

- How should the MEND explosions of April 2006 and the abduction of Chinese oil workers in 2007 be interpreted? Is it a sign of things to come for Chinese oil capital or a continuation of resistance against all foreign oil companies – regardless of their nationality or the faction of transnational capital that they represent?

- What is the potential impact of the entry of Chinese oil capital on the volatile oil-rich region given its rather weak record on human rights and social responsibility in other African oil or mineral rich locales? Protests have occurred in Zambia against the poor working and safety conditions in Chinese-owned copper mines (Shacinda, 2006; *Lusaka Times*, 2008; *Asia News*, 2008), and Sudan where Chinese oil companies are 'in bed' with the Sudanese state (Large, 2007:51-76; Patey, 2007:997-1016), and have reportedly backed state repression of local resistance and armed conflict in oil rich areas?
- What are the prospects in the new phase of local resistance in the Niger Delta since 2005, marked by a transition to insurgent opposition, in an era where globalised oil has become the metaphor for the energy security of the world's powers to be pursued by *all* means – fair and foul?

This article is organised into four parts. The introduction sets out its parameters of the issues related to resistance to oil globalisation in the Niger Delta. I then explore the role of the globalisation-resistance dialectic, particularly as it relates to the transnationalised relations of oil production, accumulation and distribution, and the role of the Nigerian state and petro-elite. The third section provides an analysis of the current form(s) of civic action and local resistance, focusing mainly on the politics and strategies of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which has recently emerged as the combative face of local resistance in the Niger Delta. Finally I explore the prospects for the future.

### **Between Globalisation & Local Resistance in the Niger Delta**

Globalisation is a multifaceted but contested concept (Obi, 2007:95). However it is important to note that its integrative and transformative processes on a worldwide scale are widely acknowledged (Mittleman & Chin, 2005). Yet, within such transformation and integration there are *embedded inequalities* and *injustices* built into relations of dispossession and accumulation, domination and exploitation, wealth and poverty and widening gaps at the local, national, regional and global levels. It is also important to note that such inequities also spawn dialectic – counter hegemonic discourses and resistance movements by people(s) 'whose modes of existence are threatened by globalisation' (Mittleman & Chin, 2005:26).

Resistance is a dialectic response to the universalising and interventionist logic of capitalist globalisation. It is hinged upon the challenge to hegemonic global discourses based upon neo-liberal reforms: political and economic, and the inequities and predations linked to global accumulation and dispossession by globally integrated economic actors. It can be also located within 'Antonio Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony, Karl Polanyi's notion of counter-movements and James Scott's idea of infrapolitics' (Mittleman and Chin, 2005:17-27). These approaches focus on the class, everyday and individual forms of resistance to a dominant structure or locus of social power. Within the context of this paper, the approach will be eclectic and historical, drawing upon the experience(s) of local resistance as a social response to the adverse impact of oil globalisation on the Niger Delta. However, it is noted that Gramsci's argument on the 'ambiguity of resistance' (Mittleman & Chin, 2005:17-27) is also relevant given the complexities and fluid dynamics of resistance in the Niger Delta. In this regard, I acknowledge that local resistance is complex, ambiguous and even contradictory, reflecting various strands and tendencies engaged in the push and pull between and within local forces, elites and the Nigerian petro-state.

Local resistance in the context of the Niger Delta refers to 'a collective action directed at blocking further alienation, expropriation and environmental degradation. It represents a mass project of restitution and self-determination' arising from the exploitation of the region's oil by MNOCs backed by the Nigerian state (Obi, 2001, 2005b: 318). Recently the politics of local resistance has been couched in the rhetoric of 'resource control': the demand for local autonomy (within a federal state) and control of the natural resources of the Niger Delta by the indigenes of the region.

This does not mean the struggle for 'resource control' is exclusively a project of 'revolutionary pressures from below'. The Niger Delta elite for example, a faction of the dominant national bloc also appropriated the rhetoric of popular pressure and has used it to demobilise local resistance. That has been done by co-opting youth leaders into its political agenda and reinforcing its waning legitimacy within the Niger Delta. That has taken place while leveraging its bargaining power vis-à-vis other factions of the national ruling class for a larger share of the 'oil pie'. Indeed for some of the militant forces engaged in the on-going struggles, local resistance is no more than an opportunity for them to use violence as a modality of survival and enrichment by navigating between the spaces occupied by competing local elite interests, local opposition and popular/communal civic organisations, the MNOCs and the Nigerian state. Thus, local resistance in the Niger Delta could be ambiguous, contradictory and progressive, depending on existing exigencies and balance of forces.

It is therefore hardly surprising that local resistance found expression in Nigeria's oil enclave. This was also a region of long standing agitation for ethnic minority rights that culminated in an abortive attempt at secession in 1966. Accounting for over 90 per cent of the oil produced in Nigeria and host to the oil super majors, massive oil fields, technological and administrative infrastructure of the oil industry, the Niger Delta is a site of global oil production, and resistance. In the 1990s the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) representing the Ogoni, one of the smallest ethnic minority groups in the Niger Delta, blazed the trail of non-violent local resistance by presenting a Bill of Rights to the Nigerian government and waging an effective international campaign against Shell (Saro Wiwa, 1995; Obi, 2005b:318-327).

In spite of the execution of its leaders by the military government in November 1995 and the militarisation of the region, the Ogoni (MOSOP's) example of resistance, was followed by the largest ethnic minority group in the Niger Delta, the Ijaw. Unlike the Ogoni who are have a small population, Ukiwo notes, 'the Ijaw are arguably Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic group and occupy the coastal fringes of vast sections of Southern Nigeria' (2007:591). The Ijaw are also spread across the coastal states. Ijaw youth organisations such as the Chikoko Movement (CM) and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) demanded resource control in the Kaiama Declaration in December 1998. Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 did little to alter the inequitable social relations in the Niger Delta. Rather, the crisis in the region deepened as the state continued to repress protests against oil companies, contributing to the descent into violent resistance. This was both a response to the intensified exploitation of the region as well as the militarisation of its politics by the state, oil multinationals and the political elite (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Obi, 2006b; 2007:93-106). The contemporary militants are at some levels embedded in the discourses of the popular classes of the Niger Delta as a liberation movement, but at other times they sometimes collaborate with local elite factions. They also target an international

audience – sending emails and photographs of abducted expatriate oil workers to international and local media, and giving interviews to select print and television journalists (Junger, 2007; Ekwuruke, 2006; Shaxson, 2007). Since 2006, the targets for attacks have included the Nigerian state, military operatives in the region, oil multinationals, oil installations/pipelines, oil service operators and foreigners working for MNOCs, and in the context of this paper, Chinese oil corporations.

Under former President Obasanjo's administration (1999-2007), the foreign investments in the oil, mining and wholesale trade sectors of the Nigerian economy were intensified. In relation to the Niger Delta, this took the form of the expansion of oil operations in the region which was further boosted by the arrival of 'new' oil corporations in the quest for oil. This contributed to the increased presence of government military troops in the region and the repression of local communities opposed to, or protesting against, the continued exploitation and despoliation of their lands by oil companies and neglect by the federal and state governments. The former president was often quick to dismiss the militants in the Niger Delta. He declared they were 'criminals, rascals and rogue elements', conspiring against the nation's economic interests – to be crushed at all cost (Chiedozie, 2006, 2007; Onuorah, Etim & Ebiri, 2007). Yet, there were contradictions in the policy towards militants, including a mix of appeasement through pay-offs and offers of oil contracts to militant-related companies. There was also force with the establishment of a military Joint Task Force (JTF) to crush the militants. Also of note, was the involvement of local state officials in racketeering with state resources earmarked for buying off pliant militants or violent elements. On the whole, the policy has been more of the use of the coercive apparatus of the state to repress any opposition to transnational oil-based accumulation.

### **China & the 'New' Scramble for Oil in Nigeria's Niger Delta**

China's rapid economic penetration of Nigeria is best understood in terms of its historical and growing trade, energy, aid and strategic interests in Africa (Wenping, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Alden, 2007; Large, 2008:45-61). As a rising global power, Chinese leaders and policymakers are of the view that a critical part of the country's energy security lies in increasing its access to stable oil supplies around the world, including Africa. As the Chinese ambassador to South Africa, Liu Guijin put it,

*China is diversifying to secure its supply, and now imports energy from countries in Africa such as Angola, Nigeria and Sudan (IRIN News, 2006a).*

Chinese state oil companies have in the last decade entered into the highly competitive African oil sector, long the exclusive preserve of western oil multinationals, state corporations and independents. Its strategies for winning oil in Africa include: investing in countries where western companies have lost ground, or have been forced to withdraw as a result of the policies of their home governments towards host-states, as in the case of Sudan (Patey, 2007:997-1016) where the exit of western oil companies paved the way for the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to buy (40 per cent) into the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPC). The GNPC commenced oil exports in 1999 and is the largest oil company in the country. Sudan (Africa's third largest oil producer) exports between 50-60% of its oil and accounts for an estimated 7 per cent of China's oil imports. On the whole, it is reported that China 'presently imports 30 per cent of its oil from Africa, compared to 47 per cent from the Middle East' (Chen, 2006).

With regard to oil investments in Nigeria, Taylor (2007: 636) points out that in late 2004, China's Sinopec signed two agreements: with Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) to develop five exploration wells, and another with the Nigerian Petroleum Development Corporation (NPDC) and the subsidiary of Italian oil company, the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC-Eni) to develop the Okono and Okpoho oil fields. Mbachu (2006:79) also notes that in the same year, PetroChina signed an agreement with the NNPC for the *daily* supply of 30,000 barrels of oil to China for five years.

However, China's 'big break' came, when the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) acquired 'a 45 per cent stake in a Nigerian oil-for-gas field for US\$2.27 billion and also purchased 35 per cent of an oil exploration licence in the Niger Delta for US\$60 million' in April 2006 (IRIN News, 2006a). The amount paid for the Akpo deepwater oil field included the 'financing of NNPC's 50 per cent equity stake in OPL 246 (Akpo oil-for-gas field) as well as South Atlantic Petroleum's 10 per cent equity in the block' (Oduniyi & Ezigbo, 2006; Alexander's Gas and Oil Connections, 2006). This was after some initial controversy following CNOOC's announcement of its acquisition of the Akpo or OML 130, an offshore oil field covering some 500 square miles in January 2006, following a deal with South Atlantic Petroleum Limited. However, SAPETRO's ownership of OML 130 was revoked by the NNPC shortly after the deal, leading the former to head for the courts. SAPETRO's action was fuelled by the fact that its owner, Nigeria's former Defence Minister, retired Army General Theophilus Danjuma felt that the company's oil license was revoked for political reasons. The CNOOC acquisition in Nigeria in 2006 was its largest in the world and guaranteed the company 70 per cent of the profits from OPL 246, while the NNPC would take 30 per cent of the profits and 80 per cent of the costs. Chinese oil companies also benefited from Nigeria's sale of four oil blocks (two in the Chad Basin and two in the Niger Delta) to the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) in April 2006 following a visit to Nigeria by China's President Hu Jintao.

The foregoing suggests that China is a catalyst in the 'new scramble' for Niger Delta's oil. Reports in some Western media that Nigeria had turned to China for arms with which to fight Niger Delta militia after Washington had turned down an earlier request had sent alarm bells ringing in western capitals (Roughneen, 2006). Such fears were heightened by news that Nigeria had sealed a deal with China's National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation to buy 12 Fighter jets (F-7NI) and 3 Trainer jets (FT-7NI) and 'associated equipment' valued at \$251 million (*The China Monitor*, June 2007; Azaiki, 2006; *Defense Industry Daily*, 2005). Although some have argued that China is merely following the steps of Western countries that have plundered Africa's resources over the centuries (a new imperialism), others claim that China's policies in Africa provide support (money and arms) for dictatorial and corrupt regimes in complete disregard of the norms of good governance, respect for human rights and environmental standards (Large, 2007:52-57).

There is however, another school of thought. This argues that the Chinese threat to Western oil interests in Africa is overstated (Downs, 2007: 42-68). A further view is that Nigeria stands to gain from the new opportunities and increased revenues that China's entry and 'no-strings-attached' development aid portend. However, it is clear that China is far behind long-established Western oil corporations that jointly account for most of the oil produced from the Niger Delta. The same holds true in

terms of the size of oil investments, and access to oil from the Niger Delta oil fields. Western interests in the Niger Delta's oil have been framed both within profit calculations, and the broad post-9/11 US-led global energy security agenda for the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea (Obi, 2005a:38-41; Obi, 2006a:87-101). That is writ large in partnership programmes such as the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Initiative (TSTI), the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), the US-supported eight nation Gulf of Guinea Guard Force (GGGF), and the Africa Command (AFRICOM), expected to come on stream later this year, thus underscoring the militarisation/securitisation of (Africa's) oil by the transnational Western alliance keen on the optimal exploitation and uninterrupted flow of oil and gas (Klare & Volman, 2004:226-231; Klare & Volman, 2006:297-309).

### **Local Resistance in the Niger Delta: MEND**

*It must be clear that the Nigerian government cannot protect your workers or assets. Leave our land while you can or die in it. Our aim is to totally destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil (part of MEND's message to oil multinationals in the Niger Delta, statement cited by Howden, 2006).*

MEND took Nigeria and the world by surprise when it attacked the EA oilfield off the coast of the Niger Delta on 11 January 2006 abducting four oil workers who were held for nineteen days. Four days later on 15 January, it struck again. It attacked the Benisede oil flow station, reportedly killing fourteen soldiers and two civilians (Howden, 2006). As a result of the attack, Shell was forced to shut-in an estimated 115,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd), while oil exports through the Forcados oil terminal was significantly reduced. This was followed on 18 February by an attack on a Willbros (oil service company) vessel laying pipes for Shell and the abduction of nine foreign oil workers whose photographs in the company of heavily armed men clad in camouflage fatigues, balaclava and masks were flashed across the world's leading newspapers and media networks. The attack by MEND and its associated groups, particularly the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), was partly in retaliation for earlier attacks by helicopter gunships belonging to the Nigerian military on Okerenkoko, part of the Ijaw clan in the western Delta, in February 2006, ostensibly to put an end to 'illegal oil bunkering activities' – large-scale theft of oil (James, 2006). According to reports in the local media, that attack seriously damaged houses and injured people in the impoverished community. The militant onslaught also involved an attack on Shell's flow stations, pipelines and the Forcados oil tanker export platform, leading to a significant reduction in Nigeria's oil production from late February 2006 up to the contemporary period. A history of local resistance and the cycle of attacks by government helicopter gun ships and reprisals by Ijaw militia in the western Delta in early 2006 marked the fiery birth of MEND.

The MEND phenomenon is the culmination of decades of neglect, militarism and injustice in the Niger Delta, and the subversion of democracy in the region by local elites linked to the hegemonic federal ruling bloc, since Nigeria's return to elected civilian rule in May 1999. One of the earliest authoritative studies of MEND notes that 'there is no such thing as MEND'. It clarifies this by pointing out that it is 'not an organisation in the formal sense of the word' (Okonta, 2006:9). In addition, Okonta explains that 'it is an idea, a general principle underlying the slew of communal, civic and youth movements that began to proliferate in the Niger Delta, and particularly in the Ijaw-speaking areas in the wake of General Babangida's failed

adjustment policies in the late-1980's' (Okonta, 2006:9). This view has been corroborated by Jomo Gbomo the leader and spokesperson of MEND. In an interview with Brian Ross of ABC News he noted that:

*MEND is an amalgam of all arm bearing groups in the Niger Delta fighting for the control of the oil revenue by indigenes of the Niger Delta who have had relatively no benefits from the exploitation of our mineral resources by the Nigerian government and oil companies over the last fifty years (cited in Ross, 2007).*

In another interview, Jomo noted that:

*we are asking for justice. We want our land, and the Nigerian government to transfer all its involvement in the oil industry to host communities which will become shareholders in these oil companies (saharareporters, 2007)*

It is clear that MEND is a metaphor of a decentralised broad alliance of local resistance groups in the Niger Delta. This is a heavily armed but elusive gadfly and a growing threat to the hegemony of the Nigerian federal state, the extractive interests of oil companies and the energy security of the world's powers. In essence, by attacking the jugular of globalised oil-based accumulation in the Niger Delta, MEND seeks to seize 'resource control' and power over the oil in the region. In unambiguous terms, the object of its brand of resistance is to counter the hegemony of the transnational oil alliance. It is to:

*continue to nibble at the Nigerian oil export industry until we think it necessary to deal it a final crippling blow. We have caused the oil companies and Nigerian government to pay more for our oil and eventually, it will be snatched right out of their grip (saharareporters, 2007; IRIN News, 2006b).*

Okonta further makes the point that 'MEND is deeply embedded at the local level of Ijawland and owes its strength and legitimacy to four factors. It successfully tapped into a 50 year old Ijaw quest for justice and widespread grassroots support, its nature as a loose coalition of fighting forces active in all parts of the Niger Delta, its familiarity with the difficult swampy terrain of the Niger Delta, and its astute manipulation of the mass media' (Okonta, 2006:13). However, as a foreign journalist that visited one of MEND's camps in the Niger Delta noted, MEND's support also spans some members of the Niger Delta Diaspora (Junger, 2007:24). They tap into the globalised on-line network of local resistance to strategise, promote the cause, transfer information, resources and establish strategic contacts for promoting the cause. It has therefore been difficult for security agencies and consultants to check the attacks of MEND or penetrate and subvert the activities of the broad organisation.

Okonta aptly notes that the use of emails, photographs and hostage taking by MEND, is designed:

*to focus the attention of Western governments and the world's media on the Niger Delta, exploiting the blaze of publicity generated by hostage-taking to press their grievances and demands (Okonta, 2006:14-15).*

In a dramatic case in December 2006, MEND emailed foreign news agencies that it was about to explode car bombs in the Niger Delta, then exploded the bombs at compounds belonging to Shell, and then Agip in Port Harcourt, and then decided not to explode a third device 'to avoid human casualties' (ABS CBN, 2006; BBC



News, 2006). As a result of the attacks, Shell relocated its staff from the compound and moved them to 'more secure areas' (*Mail and Guardian*, 2006). The point however was made to the international community that MEND could announce and then strike at oil company interests in the Niger Delta.

Towards the end of 2007, the temporary truce declared by MEND before the April 2007 general elections in Nigeria, and after, when the newly elected President set up the Niger-Delta Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee (NDPCRC) broke down. Amidst all this, Western anxieties about the security of its energy interests in the Niger Delta have continued to grow on the basis of the large number of oil expatriates being ransomed, attacks by armed groups and substantial oil production losses. A frightening picture of 'state failure' in the Niger Delta has been assembled. Citing a confidential survey Iannacone notes, 'the five best-trained groups have a combined fighting force of 10,000 men and access to 25,000 weapons' (Iannacone, 2007:2).

While the intention of such a report in magnifying the 'security threat' in the Niger Delta is not in doubt, it brings into sharp relief the biting effect of MEND's attacks in 2007 which targeted Shell, Agip and Chevron. Those attacks led to a shut-in of 27 per cent or 675,000 bpd out of Nigeria's estimated daily production of 2.4 million bpd, the highest levels of loss since the crisis began. A breakdown of the figures by mid-2007 for the shut-ins in oil fields, destroyed pipelines and platforms and affected MNOCs as provided by Swartz (2007), were as follows in barrels per day: Forcados Terminal and EA Platform – Shell, 477,000; Olero Creek – Chevron, 70,000; Agip – 15,000; Nembe Creek – Shell, 77,000 and Ogbainbiri – Agip, 36,000.

The evidence since late 2007 suggests that the MEND alliance has witnessed some factionalisation. These splits have been fluid and complicated as the various groups and factional leaders jostle over space and influence of the political agenda of the Niger Delta resistance. Although, the 'coalition' showed some affinity between FNDIC (with Bello Oboko and Government Ekpemupolo playing leading roles) and MEND in the early part of 2006, by 2007, it appeared the situation had shifted. MEND's Gbomo Jomo, claimed in an interview that 'MEND does not have a relationship with FNDIC in Warri', while noting that 'all units which fought under Asari have been co-opted into our structure' (sahareporters, 2007). This referred to the alliance between MEND and Asari Dokubo's Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), another militia, led by an erstwhile ally of the politicians linked to the ruling People's Democratic Party in Rivers state. It is also noteworthy, that some reports have identified affinity between the factions with each of the various states of the Niger Delta, particularly Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers.

Since 2006 other leaders of MEND's affiliate groups have reportedly included 'General' Brutus Ebiapai, 'General' Tamuno, 'General' Tompolo, Soboma George of the 'Outlaws', and Farah Ipalibo of the Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF), among others (Wellington, 2007), including Gbomo Jomo.<sup>2</sup> At present, the groups like the Martyrs Brigade, the Reformed Niger Delta Volunteer Force (a breakaway faction of the Asari Dokubo's Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force) and MEND operate as the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC), led by Cynthia Whyte. There are also reports that some fighters involved in MEND's operations are freelance – guns-for-hire individuals or mercenaries (Ebiri, 2008a). However, since September 2007, the MEND has split into two broad factions over differences on how to engage with the newly elected Nigerian government led by President Yar Adua. The new government had freed Asari Dokubo and former Bayelsa state governor Diepreye

Alamieseigha from jail and these had been two of the requests included in MEND's original list of demands. MEND was also unsure how to respond to the arrest of a factional leader Henry Okah,<sup>3</sup> on allegations of gun running in Angola (Ashby, 2008).

The scenario has remained dire after the Ijaw Youth Leaders Forum and the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) announced their withdrawal from the peace talks with government claiming 'they had uncovered a covert plan by the Federal Government to employ the dialogue session to bring the militants together in order to weaken their ranks and destroy them' (*Guardian*, 2007). In an email sent on 17 December 2007, to media houses and activists worldwide, Gbomo Jomo noted that MEND had 'long suspected the insincerity of the Nigerian government, and the oil majors along with their collaborators', citing 'a secret memo leaked from the office of the Chief of Defence Staff' to 'plan an attack while at the same time pretending to talk peace'. Beyond withdrawing from the talks, MEND urged all its factions to unite and 'wage war' to 'cripple the oil industry in Nigeria'. This suggests that the conflict will in the short to medium term, escalate, amidst efforts by the federal interventionist military Joint Task Force (JTF) to reign in Ateke Tom, the leader of the Niger Delta Vigilantes that reportedly claimed responsibility for attacks on police stations in which 16 people were killed (Ogundele, 2008; Ebiri, 2008b).

While some individuals, including Asari Dokubo (who had fallen out with Henry Okah), and groups like the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) have indicated their readiness to work with the government, the others, linked to Henry Okah, have insisted on his unconditional release for any talks with the government. They have called for unity within MEND's ranks to 'fight against injustice and criminality' (Gbomo, cited in Eguzozie, 2008). However, the deportation of Henry Okah from Angola to Nigeria, and his arraignment on a 47 count charge including treason, terrorism, conspiracy and illegal possession of fire arms before a Nigerian court in Jos, central Nigeria on 3 April 2008 (Owuamanam, 2008), implies that those groups within MEND that support him will likely continue to push the militant resistance agenda. It is not clear what the balance of forces within MEND is given the fluid and expedient dynamics within it, and the elusive nature of its collective leadership, but it is clear that the crisis in the Niger Delta will continue to fester for some time to come.

### **MEND & Niger Delta Local Elite: More Questions than Answers?**

MEND as a movement is more of a collective metaphor of resistance with varied and various factions and tendencies which engages the state and the dominant elite, at various levels, and varying degrees of penetration, opposition and collaboration. As renowned activist and scholar of the Niger Delta, Ike Okonta noted:

*MEND is still very much a movement in gestation. There are several currents each jostling for prominence; there are radicals, moderates, hardliners, etc. Also there are individuals embedded in mainstream elite politics, but there are also a core group struggling to maintain its hold on a policy of rejection of Nigerian politics as it is presently played out (2007).*

This article suggests that the 'core group' of MEND lies at the heart of the latest phase of the politics of local resistance in the Niger Delta. It appears that Gbomo Jomo is the public face of this group, but the people involved place a lot of premium on remaining 'faceless'. Ukiwo (2007:607) explains this as 'part of the strategy of the group to keep the identity of its leaders secret in order to escape arrest or avoid compromise'.

The core group of MEND is quite critical of Nigerian politics and the political elite of the Niger Delta. Responding to a question on his view of the politicians of the Niger Delta, Gbomo Jomo, the group's spokesperson, responded,

*Politicians of the Delta are no different from politicians elsewhere in Nigeria. The rot is right at the top and has spread right down* (saharareporters, 2007).

In relation to the link between the nature of the political leadership and the struggle for freedom, he also noted that, 'Nigeria will only be free when all citizens resolve to take drastic action to rid our society of these criminals who have imposed themselves as rulers over a helpless citizenry'. Thus, by raising the illegitimacy of the leadership of the Niger Delta and Nigerian political class that has forcibly imposed itself on Nigerians largely through the manipulation of elections and military repression and denied them their citizenship rights, Gbomo provides justification for the use of force in removing the illegitimate and exploitative political leadership that in his view is responsible for the decay in society.

In the same regard, it could be argued that the radical strand of MEND appears to have lost faith in formal political structures of governance and democracy in Nigeria. In response to a question on elections in Nigeria, Gbomo, was of the view that, 'we are apolitical in structure and will not be concerned with the fraudulent electoral process. This process will not influence our actions in the Niger Delta.' Yet, a few months later, the organisation imposed a unilateral ceasefire in the Niger Delta during and after the 2007 Nigerian elections. However, after expressing 'increasingly frustration with the government's unwillingness to address the core cause of agitation in the Niger Delta, our demand for ownership and control of our resources' (*The Port Harcourt Telegraph*, 2007; Orere, 2007; Ndubuisi, 2007; Oraeki, 2007) and doubts about governments sincerity, MEND called off its ceasefire in December 2007. Yet, other groups previously associated with MEND have taken a stand different from Gbomo's.

MEND has also been critical of other armed groups in the region with links to politicians, and has distanced itself from their narrow or criminal interests (Vesperini, 2006; Ukiwo, 2007:607-608). In the clashes between 'armed cult groups' in Port Harcourt in August 2007 in which many people were killed, and the military deployed ground troops and helicopter gunships to disperse armed gangs, while imposing a curfew on the city, MEND was quick to condemn all sides of the conflict. It blamed the military for siding with the state governor and attacking his perceived enemies and for adopting strong-arm tactics that resulted in civilian casualties (Ogbu, 2007; Ekeinde, 2007). More fundamentally, MEND noted:

*The blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the state governor, who like his predecessors, patronised gangs to ensure victory in elections* (Adelusi & Ogundele, 2007).

This line of thinking has been repeated in the local media, particularly in the Niger Delta, confirming the earlier position that local politicians had co-opted, armed and sustained some militants and violent gangs in the intimidation of voters and the stealing of the vote in the 1999, 2003 and 2007 elections in the region (Oraeki, 2007; Niger Delta Civil Society Coalition, 2007; Watts, 2007:647).

MEND has devoted a lot of its energy in fostering an image of credibility about its commitment to resource control in the Niger Delta. While it provides information about the timing, location and exact targets of its attacks and the identities,

nationalities and pictures of its hostages, it has also been quick to deny attacks by other groups not linked to it, but credited to MEND. At some point, in response to what it referred to as the activities of 'government sponsored criminals' in Delta state, MEND threatened to direct its resources 'to attacks on facilities in Delta state and will arm and encourage all groups to do likewise' (Ofili, 2007). It also warned:

*Any emails emanating from accounts outside of this should be disregarded. It is unfortunate that a few fraudulent self-serving Ijaws allow themselves be used as tools for the oppression of the majority of the indigenes of the Niger Delta.*

This appears to be a rather extreme measure, but it was calculated to discourage what was seen as a state-sponsored campaign to discredit MEND. Beyond this, the opportunity was used to reiterate the ideals that MEND was fighting for and its commitment to the emancipation of the people and resources of the region.

What flows from the foregoing is that while its radical core largely controls the media or public face of MEND, the group is itself a 'loose coalition', which (Okonta 2007, communication with author) is made up of 'disparate groups with diverse goals and modus operandi'. The implication of this is often that, 'there is no way of knowing when they are acting in their own political interest or pursuing the agenda of those who recruit them for a particular project'. This goes to the heart of the ambiguities that are embedded in local resistance as a counter hegemonic movement. It is relevant to the analysis of the implications of China's entry into the Niger Delta as a site of global oil production.

## **Local Resistance & Global Energy Security: A Globalised Perspective**

The Niger Delta is critical to global energy, petroleum and natural gas supplies. Thus, its place in the West's global energy security calculations is framed within the context of the larger West African oil gulf stretching from Mauritania to Angola (and possibly Namibia) that accounts for about 15 per cent of US oil imports which is expected to grow to 25 per cent in 2020 (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007:3). The Niger Delta with some of the most prolific oil and gas fields in Africa is important to transnational oil accumulation as a site of extraction and production. Since 9/11, the globalisation of the Niger Delta's oil has gone side-by-side with its 'securitisation', in which global hegemonic forces see the oil as a vital 'globally-needed' resource, whose continued 'uninterrupted' flow along with the safety of (transnational) oil investments and oil workers must be protected at all costs, including military means.

In a succinct analysis of US perspective to its global energy security Klare (2007:1-7), argues that the US military has been transformed

*into a global oil protection service whose primary mission is to defend America's overseas sources of oil and natural gas, while patrolling the world's major pipelines and supply routes.*

In relation to the crises in the Niger Delta, the US government is concerned about the threats posed to American and western interests by the local militias operating in the region (Marquardt, 2006; Obi, 2006a:94). The US deputy assistant secretary of defence informed a forum in Washington in March 2007, that the US had 'proposed a regional maritime awareness capabilities programme for the Nigerian navy worth \$16 billion' (Fisher-Thompson, 2007). Part of the concerns of AFRICOM is the rising security and strategic premium of the oil-rich Gulf of Guinea.

There is also ample evidence that at a regional level, the countries of the West African region have bought into the US-led globalised discourse on security, with Nigeria as the arrowhead. Accordingly, eight countries – Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and an unnamed<sup>4</sup> country (with US support) have formed the Gulf of Guinea Guard Force (GGGF) (Olayinka, 2007). Given that the Niger Delta holds the largest oil reserves in the region, it is clear that both the United States and its regional allies are intent on ‘securing’ it to ensure unfettered transnational oil extraction and capitalist accumulation.

## **Conclusion: Enter the Dragon?**

Evidence from available information suggests that given that Chinese oil companies have just arrived, and have not commenced full oil production in their concessions in the Niger Delta, there is no direct hostility towards them. Responses to questions posed to scholars and activists dealing with Niger Delta issues, and fieldwork-based interviews with some residents of Sagbama community in Bayelsa state where Chinese oil workers were kidnapped in 2007,<sup>5</sup> confirm these views. In response to such questions, Nnimmo Bassey of the Environmental Rights Action (ERA), a rights NGO active in the oil Delta, was of the view that the attacks took place because, ‘some people were afraid of competition’, noting further, ‘there would be no special threat to the Chinese. The scenario is the same for all interests foreign to the locality’ (Bassey, 2007, communication with author). This view resonates with Okonta’s position that,

*There is no coherent and systematic hostility to China in the Delta, at least for the time being. I would read this incident as a one-off, and not to be seen as consistent with the decades-old struggle against the Nigerian state and the western oil companies in the region.*

His interpretation of the April 2006 attack is that:

*some business groups who lost out in the bidding war for oil acreage conducted by the Nigerian government in 2006 recruited some of the Delta militants to harass Chinese oil interests in Nigeria (Okonta, 2007b, communication with author).*

Felix Tuodolo, the founding President of the IYC and Chair of the Ijaw National Congress (INC), Europe, repeated a similar view, noting that:

*the focus is not on any particular foreign national or business interest, but on all foreign oil interests. The incident at Sagbama and the earlier statement by MEND was a mere coincidence.*

He went on to posit that a faction of MEND decided to insert the word ‘Chinese’ into their statement ‘because while other multinationals were jittery about continuing operations in the Niger Delta, the Chinese were signing new oil contracts with the federal Government’ (Tuodolo, 2007, communication with author). Also, the cross section of people interviewed in Sagbama, including the Pere of Kumbowei kingdom, King Jones Sufadon Akadah, noted that the Chinese were not specifically targeted, but rather, ‘every other expatriate worker found in the region’<sup>6</sup> (Adesi, Sagbama fieldwork reports).

The militarisation of local resistance has brought the chickens home to roost for the Nigerian state and foreign oil multinationals. This is because these various strands of the resistance driven by an amalgam of anger, the quest for self-determination,

opportunism and greed have 'spun out of control', further complicating the social conditions for oil extraction, and fomenting a full-blown crisis that has cost the MNOCs and the Nigerian state dear. Today, most of the oil companies, particularly the on-shore oil operators find themselves between a rock and a hard place – as a direct consequence of their oil-based 'accumulation by dispossession' in the Delta. For the forces of local resistance the stakes have climbed higher and the struggles have become more violent and complex – with groups operating fluid dynamics and entering into ambiguous coalitions, partly driven by exigencies and riding on the deep sense of grievance in the region.

### **What then are the Prospects for the Future?**

For the oil multinationals, it is impossible to continue with 'business as usual' in their relations with the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta. While some are attempting to distance themselves from the 'old ways' by suggesting 'mistakes were made', their welding to the Nigerian state by the processes of transnational accumulation has limited any real gesture towards the transformation of the exploitative power relations in the Niger Delta. But it is clear that something would have to give. In the view of Tuodolo, the founding President of the IYC, the solution lies in addressing the demands of the people as laid out in the Ogoni Bill of Rights, the Kaiama Declaration and others by the Niger Delta ethnic minorities, which emphasise self-determination and resource control, rather than strong-arm tactics and attempts to buy out local leaders and opposition by the state-oil transnational partnership (Tuodolo, communication with author, 2007). On his part, Bassey is of the view that western MNOCs 'should not be agents of environmental despoliation and human rights abridgements', and 'should avoid double-standards and not be a party to the multi-level corruption endemic in the industry'.

If the Chinese oil companies strike oil in huge quantities in their oil blocs in the Niger Delta, it is likely that they would remain and be confronted with the issues arising from transnational oil production and local resistance. A lot will depend on their ability to engage with the local people, *demonstrate respect* and concrete sensitivity to their plight and their demands, by building trust between and with the communities. Given that China is still grappling 'with how best to manage strategic assets located in areas of conflict, but rights to which depend on a good relationship with government' (Africa-Asia Confidential, 2007), as in Sudan, the Niger Delta is bound to pose great challenges for the contending transnational oil interests in the Niger Delta, not least the new and yet marginal Chinese entrants.

The prospects for the future of local resistance in the Niger Delta depend on the balance of forces within the groups themselves, and the response or non-response of the Nigerian state and the transnational oil alliance to local demands. In the short run the coming of the Chinese oil 'dragons' will not alter the nature of transnational oil politics or the forms of local resistance. Fundamentally, in the coming days and years, the resolution of the multiple crisis should depend not on the preponderance of the use of force but on a radical democratisation of oil power and the (re)distribution of oil for the benefit of the majority of the people of the Niger Delta within the context of a transformatory democratic, equitable and developmental Nigerian nation-state project. The real challenge is how China's oil companies will define their role(s) in the slippery and volatile politics of oil in the Niger Delta as the stakes for the control of access to the region's finite hydrocarbon resources climb higher.

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## Endnotes

1. They were kidnapped on 25 January and freed on 4 February 2007.
2. This is a pseudonym for a 'faceless' leader who articulates the ideology, demands and agenda of the MEND through emails.
3. There is some speculation in the media that this may be Gbomo, but in spite of Henry's incarceration, Gbomo has continued to send emails to the media.
4. It is 'unnamed' according to the author of the news report, Olayinka. The GGGF is different from the current request for US assistance to contain the crises in the Niger Delta by Nigeria's Vice-President to a visiting delegation of six US Congressmen led by the Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Relations, Howard Berman; see <http://www.platts.com/Oil/News/8856889.xml> for report. Full Reference, see Platts Oilgram News, 'Nigeria seeks US assistance to curb spiraling oil theft in Delta', 4 July 2008.
5. Akpoebi Adesi, assisted by Albert German, conducted fieldwork and interviews in Sagbama between 9-16, September 2007. A total of 8 people were interviewed including opinion leaders, the traditional ruler, and members of the Sagbama Community Development Committee.
6. Akpoebi Adesi, interview with HRM King Jones Sufadon Akadah, the Pere of Kumbowei kingdom in Sagbama.

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