

RISE OF NEW REBEL GROUPS, BACKED BY LOCAL ETHNIC AND SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS RISK TO TRANSFORM OIL PRODUCING NIGER DELTA REGIONS INTO HOTBED OF INSURGENCY

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Since Goodluck Jonathan, the first president from the Niger Delta region, lost re-election in March 2015, and even more since the beginning of the year, the **steady raise of violence in Nigeria's southeast** already demonstrated a new alarming trend for regional security. Following the latest attacks in the Niger Delta regions claimed by the newly-emerged **Niger Delta Avengers group**, this alarming trend has now reached a defining moment marking the **revival of Niger Delta insurgency** that risk to divert foreign investors from the region.

The emergence of the new and yet, very efficient group, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) is more than noteworthy. Although signs of mobilization and protest movements could be seen in the past months in the region, mostly driven by Ijaw people, sometimes in form of non-organized groups or former MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta), the **NDA is absolutely a new phenomenon** in the area in the recent years, for at least **3 reasons: its fast-growing development, the sophistication, frequency and impact of the attacks** and to some extent, the **nature of its grievances**. In light of these considerations, it can be assumed that Niger Delta regions, are dangerously getting closer to another round of a full-scale insurgency.

This trend is particularly alarming for Nigeria **in a context of record low oil prices and of the persistent Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast**. On May 16, Ibe Kachikwu, Minister of state for petroleum, said recent insurgent attacks in the oil-rich Niger Delta regions have already resulted in a cut of oil production by 800,000 barrels per day (bpd), dropping a daily production to 1.4 million barrels, i.e. nearly to a 22-year-low level.

Further escalation of violence in the region could cripple production in a country already facing a growing economic crisis, where oil production

generates 70 percent of state income. Last but not least, the naira fell to 350 to the dollar on the parallel market, against an official rate of 199, amid reports and denials that President Muhammadu Buhari's government plans an imminent devaluation.

In a bid to reassure foreign investors, the President Muhammadu Buhari has said he would crush the insurgents in the area with the same manner as Boko Haram, but a wide-scale and long standing conflict in the south of the country is unlikely to be resolved only by force methods as newly emerging insurgent groups are likely to enjoy certain **support from local population and other separatist movements** in the region. This new and very alarming trend proves credibility of earlier ESISC's analyses in 2015 and 2016 where we warned about clear signs of escalations of tensions in the region.

Hence, it is worth recalling the escalation of the Nigeria Delta Avengers which announced its **creation less than 4 months ago and directly launched very considerable attacks:**

The NDA announced its formation on February 3. It launched a website and a social media (Twitter) page, which it uses to publish statements of its activities and grievances.

On February 8, in one of their first statements, the blow up of the Bonny Soku Gas Line carrying natural gas to the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas plant and of an independent power plant at Gbaran. On February 13, the blow up of the undersea Forcados Terminal Pipeline (one of Nigeria's main export terminals) operated by Shell in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State. The group claimed responsibility for the attack on its website through a statement called "Operation Red Economy" in which it also **blamed the government for depriving Niger Delta people from the control of local oil resources.** In this statement, the group issued a list of 10 demands addressed to President Buhari's government, including the unconditional release of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the separatist organization Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the continuation of funding the Niger Delta Amnesty Program.

On February 22, the group issued a statement titled "Clough Creek Tebidaba Agip Pipeline Manifold Blown Up" in which it claimed responsibility for blowing up a pipeline on February 19.

On April 17, few days after President Muhammadu Buhari vowed to crack down on "vandals and saboteurs", the NDA said it will carry out more strikes on pipeline in Nigeria's oil-producing Delta regions "until the Niger Delta people are no longer marginalized". The group blamed the government for preventing Niger Delta people to control local oil resources.

On April 22, the group issued a statement titled "Stop killing Niger Deltans in the guise of escorting oil tankers" in which it blamed naval officers of taking advantage of their mandate to escort oil tankers into the creeks to "harass, molest and kill" people in the Niger Delta on a daily basis. The group also **threatened to make the waterways unsafe for any vessel or petroleum tanker** if the government fails to listen to their warning.

On April 24, the group issued a **statement titled “Nigeria is a failed entity” in which it claimed its support for the sovereignty of Biafra** and blamed President Buhari for supporting Fulani herdsmen. In the statement, the group also claimed its **support to former President Jonathan Goodluck**, and called for a sovereign national conference where Nigerians could decide whether Nigeria should remain as it is or be divided. The group finally threatened the government with **crippling the economy** and carrying out further actions in Abuja, Lagos, Calabar, and Port Harcourt.

On May 3, the group issued a statement in response to a declaration of Government Ekpemupolo, more commonly known as Tompolo, a prominent figurehead of the MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) to Vanguard newspaper in which he said that he has no links with the NDA, calling him to stay away from their activities if he does not want to join the group.

On May 4 and 5, the NDA claimed responsibility for 3 attacks against oil and gas facilities and threatened to continue attacks, particularly in Lagos and Abuja. The two statements were, just like the previous ones, posted on the official website of the group and signed by 'Colonel Mudoch Agbinibo', the spokesman of the NDA. The first statement claimed responsibility for an attack against Okan Offshore Facility, a major platform of Chevron Nigeria Limited, an operator of a joint venture with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) which produced 35,000 bpd. The attack caused the closure of the facility situated Limited off the coast of Escravos in Warri Southwest Local Government Area of Delta State. The second statement, posted on May 5, claimed responsibility for 2 other attacks carried out the same day. First, the rebels claimed that they blew up Well D25 in Abiteye, a major gas well belonging to Chevron. They then claimed an attack against a series of pipelines of NNPC, in an undisclosed location. According to the statement, the pipelines provided oil to the refineries of Warri and Kaduna and gas to the central power station that provides electricity to Lagos and Abuja. The latest statement urged local population to unite and attack oil installations as **'international oil companies will be our first targets'**.

On May 7 and 8, the latest attacks claimed by the NDA forced the Royal Dutch Shell to evacuate most of its staff from its production facility at Eja OML 79, in Warri Local Government Area of Delta State. It was also mentioned that 98 staff members were airlifted by helicopters. Chika Onuegbu, chairman of the trade union in Rivers state, said Chevron also evacuated some staff from the Delta following Shell's decision while its (Chevron) Okan offshore oil facility was reportedly still burning.

On May 12, the group issued a statement titled “Congrats to all strike team of the NDA” in which the group congratulated all its fighters “who were able to shut down 50% of crude production without taking any innocent life”. The group then **distinguished itself from Tompolo**, saying that Avengers' method are more sophisticated and able to carry out operation “without killing a fly” while the MEND was involved into “into kidnapping, killing of Nigeria soldiers, sea pirates, vessel and tanker hijacking”. The group also said it is composed of young and educated members, including some who had reportedly infiltrated the army. Later in the statement, the NDA again threatened international oil companies, saying they will make them suffer as they have made people of the Niger Delta suffer from environmental pollution and degradation. It was also mentioned that they issued a 2 weeks ultimatum to shut down operations and evacuate the staff, otherwise they will “blow up all the location”. The group then **said**

to President Buhari that Biafra leader Nnamdi Kanu should be released. The group finally addressed the United Nations, asking to “free the people of the Niger Delta from environmental pollution, slavery, and oppression. With Niger Delta still under the country of Nigeria we can’t make it possible.”

Since May 12 the **trend is dramatically escalating.** At least 5 other (so far unclaimed) attacks have been carried in Bayelsa and Delta States accompanied by the **emergence of a second Niger Delta rebel group and a series of statements from actors of the instability in Nigeria’s southeast:**

On May 13, an explosion reportedly rocked a Chevron oil well the Marakaba pipeline in Warri Local Government Area of Delta State.

On May 16, the leader of **Biafra Independence Movement (BIM)** Chief Ralph Uwazuruike, claimed its support to any self-determination group “which does not kill people”, and particularly referred to the Niger Delta Avengers rebel group.

On May 18, gunmen blew up the Sagbama-Tuomo gas pipeline operated by Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) at Ogbembiri, a border town between Bayelsa and Delta States in Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa State. It was separately reported that suspected ex-rebels also reportedly attacked a crude oil pipeline in Brass local government area of Bayelsa state.

Meanwhile, the **Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC)** has told the Federal Government to address the issue of unequal allocation of oil blocs in the Niger Delta, or face more trouble in the region.

The same day, another **new rebel group, the Red Egbesu Water Lions** (probably composed by Ijaws), in a statement issued by its Creek Network Coordinator, “General” Torunanawei Latei, **claimed it was teaming up with the Niger Delta Avengers and the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB).** It was also mentioned that the group issued the Federal Government a 7-day ultimatum to release Nnamdi Kanu (Biafra leader) and to “defreeze” Government Ekpemupolo’s bank accounts.

On May 20, suspected rebels reportedly again bombed the Escravos Gas Pipeline, a facility of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation, NNPC, in Delta State.

Separately, President **Buhari increased security measures** in the Niger Delta regions and met senior executives of the Anglo-Dutch oil group Shell. Nigeria's naval chief was ordered to reorganize and strengthen the military joint task force (JTF) in the Niger Delta to deal effectively with the resurgence of insurgency (especially the Niger Delta Avengers) and the sabotage of oil installations.

It is worth mentioning that the same day, former MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta) rebels called for a halt to a resurgence of attacks on oil and gas facilities in Nigeria's Niger Delta, saying it is an unnecessary distraction for President Muhammadu Buhari's administration.

On May 22, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSDC) said suspected Niger Delta rebels attacked a crude oil pipeline operated by Nigerian Agip Oil Company

(NAOC), the local subsidiary of Italy's Eni along Azuzuama axis of the Tebidaba-Brass pipeline in Bayelsa State.

On May 26, the Niger Delta Avengers claimed responsibility for the blowing up a day before of a Chevron gas pipeline, which provides electricity to the Escravos tank farm in Delta state.

The same day Nigeria's Petroleum Minister said Nigeria's government needs to address grievances in the oil-producing Niger Delta while the USA consular general to Nigeria said his country was ready to help Buhari's government to end the ongoing escalation of violence in the Niger Delta.

On May 27, the insurgent group just issued 3 new statements on its Twitter account (@NDAvengers) in which it claimed responsibility for another attack against a pipeline in Delta State, demanding a sovereign state and threatening the Indigenous Oil Companies (IOC's) and the army with further attacks.

By carrying such high-impact attacks few weeks after announcing its creation, the group has **now proved its guerilla capacities and ability to carry out coordinated, sophisticated attacks on Nigeria's major oil and gas facilities, despite their protection.**

Today **little is known about the members of the group** and their ideology. Nigeria-based security experts claim that authorities have no hard facts about the group, such as its size, bases or leadership. Its members describe themselves as “young, well-travelled, mostly educated in Eastern Europe” and mainly communicate via Twitter and their website.

This lack of intelligence about the rebels led the army to launch a wide-ranging hunt across the Niger Delta regions and later claimed to have arrested members of the group. After a Nigerian military commander said the group hails from Gbaramatu Kingdom in the South-West Local Government Area, military forces moved into the region in the hopes of disrupting any plots.

Some governmental representatives also suggest links between Tompolo and NDA. Indeed, until the emergence of the Niger Delta Avengers, recent bombings and attacks on oil and gas facilities in the southern Niger Delta apparently coincided with the issue by a Lagos court of an arrest warrant on January 14 for Government Ekpemupolo.

Tompolo's case is being pursued by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), following President Muhammadu Buhari's wish to fight against corruption due to the amnesty program. Tompolo reportedly received contracts to provide services to the Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) but the agreements were allegedly used as a front to steal money. In any case, **the amnesty has been an economic boon for high-profile activists like Tompolo.** Meanwhile Tompolo distanced himself from all these previous months' attacks in the Niger Delta regions, adding that he would not have been able to get away with such an attack while under close government scrutiny. He nevertheless warned President Buhari, saying that “he should allow the people of the Niger Delta region to enjoy peace, otherwise he would neither enjoy peace.”

As ESISC previously reported, since Goodluck Jonathan, the first President from the Niger Delta, lost re-election in March 2015, former Niger Delta activists have resumed their grievances for greater resource control and self-determination, while some former rebel leaders started to threaten to resume fighting (“return to the creeks”). It is worth mentioning that President Buhari cut the budget allocated to the amnesty deal with former MEND insurgents (led by Tompolo) by about 70 percent and cancelled the contracts, citing corruption and mismanagement of funds. To recall, under the amnesty deal the state paid for job training and former insurgent groups were handed contracts to protect the pipelines they once bombed. The fall of state oil revenues risks to further fuel these moods, contributing to the resurrection of armed insurgency in the region.

At its peak in 2009, the insurgency in the Niger Delta was claiming an estimated 1,000 lives a year, had cut Nigeria’s oil output by over 50 per cent and was costing the government close to four billion naira (nearly \$19 million) per day in counterinsurgency operations. **A resurgence of violence and increased oil-related crimes in the Delta region could seriously undermine national security and economic stability, which is already weighed down by the Boko Haram insurgency and dwindling oil revenues.** Tompolo’s acceptance of a presidential amnesty program offered by the Nigerian government in 2009 was described by officials as “highly significant, some would say decisive, in ending the violence at the time.” Adding that the former rebel is still actively supported by his followers in the Niger Delta region.

Taking into account these considerations and the increasingly risky environment in the Niger Delta region, President Buhari finally decided on February 15 (2 days after the NDA announced its creation) 2016, to extend the amnesty program for 2 years, until December 2017. **Despite undoubtful positive effects of the amnesty program on the security situation in the region, youth unemployment, environmental pollution, widespread poverty and poor infrastructure remain issues unsolved.** The exclusion of local communities from oil revenues, local political tensions and the **perception by locals of the new policy of President Buhari as a "plot by a Muslim President to rob the largely Christian south of oil revenues"** could trigger new violent unrest.

Rumors also emerge in Nigerian media suggesting that Niger Delta Avengers is sponsored by politicians in the south, where Jonathan is from, “to sabotage Buhari”. It should also be recalled that current **President Buhari is a Muslim from Katsina State while Goodluck Jonathan, is a Christian from the Ijaw ethnic group and the first president coming from the Niger Delta regions which strongly supported him.** The new president has made it his priority to end corruption nationwide and to clamp down on smuggling and theft in the oil and natural gas sector. By contrast, Jonathan did not target smuggling rings, which formed his support base. Moreover, as ESISC first reported following the hijacking on January 28 of the Greek-owned and Liberia-flagged vessel reportedly carried out by Niger Delta activists allegedly supporting pro-Biafra movements, there were **growing fears of an alliance between the groups in Nigeria’s southeast regions.**

If the at the present moment there are no doubts in the reality of the threat represented by the Niger Delta Avengers, **fears of possible alliances between NDA and other local insurgent groups**, as well as a certain degree of support from local

population that NDA enjoys today, make the situation really explosive. Despite the fact that former MEND rebels repeatedly distanced themselves from the recent attacks, calls from NDA and Red Egbesu Red Lions also concern the fate of the former leaders of MEND, which suggests a fragmentation of former MEND leaders, between those who want to maintain the cease-fire and those who want to take up arms. The trend is now widely confirmed by **a series of declarations of support between a growing number of groups involved in the endangered security environment of Nigeria's southeast and oil producing regions** (namely the leader of Biafra Independence Movement, BIM, the Ijaw Youth Congress, IYC, Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB, the Red Egbesu Water Lions, the Niger Delta Avengers...). However, these groups do not yet seem to have established effective cooperation in the field. If grievances are similar, they are not yet common and only rely on statements and speeches.

To recall, most ethnic Igbos (Christian tribe representing most of Biafra and south-eastern population) believed that since the end of the civil war in 1970 and prior to the arrival of Goodluck Jonathan at the helm in 2010, Nigeria's central government deliberately pursued a discriminatory policy aimed at marginalizing them. The arrival of another Muslim president, Buhari, to the presidency, triggered fears that Igbo communities would be as marginalized as they were before Jonathan's election.

A wave of protests that started in a relatively peaceful way in 2015 dramatically radicalized following the arrest and prosecution on October 19 of Nnamdi Kanu, the director of Radio Biafra, an unlicensed radio the Nigerian government accuses of spreading hate and violence. Kanu is actually facing trial for sedition and treason and strongly endorsed violence as an instrument for resuscitating Biafra. Since his arrest, protesters demanding both his release and an independent Biafra have repeatedly clashed with security forces.

Furthermore, it is important to note **that NDA's strong support for Biafra and Kanu's release may strengthen the links between pro-Biafra (mainly Igbos) and Niger Delta activists (mainly Ijaws)**. This is all the more true when considering the groups are bounded by a large **geographical crossover** (between the Niger Delta region and the States included in the former Republic of Biafra), their struggle for the liberation of their leaders, their desire to **affirm local control of resources** by the increasing use of violence and above all, their common **strong opposition to the President Buhari** and central Nigerian state. Moreover, the regions contains oil fields that supply the three quarters of the government's revenue and gives to Igbos and Ijaws confidence in the economic viability of a Biafra or Niger Delta sovereign State.

So far, **the government apparently has no viable plan for dealing with the new rebellion** beyond extending the amnesty program and deploying more security personnel while threatening that army said it would use "all available means and measures" to crush rebels attacking oil facilities. However environmental activists and oil majors worry that a harsh crackdown could backfire. A resurgence of the insurgency that has been quiet for the past several years in the Delta region could seriously undermine economic stability and national security, which is already weighed down by Boko Haram.

What ESISC previously analyzed as a dramatically deteriorating security situation as already turned into the feared renewed insurgency in the Niger Delta regions through the emergence which now **may become a full scale insurgency**, just as the MEND used to be. But this time, scenario of **possible alliances between the new insurgent groups with separatist movements of Biafra should not be underestimated**. So far a string of attacks against oil facilities in Niger Delta already managed to make Nigeria losing its status as Africa's leading oil producer to Angola. Further escalation of insurgency in the region can have dramatic consequences, plunging the country into a deep economic crisis and spiral of violence.

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