# Community Vigilante and Its Impact on National Security: A Case Study of OSPAC in Rivers State, 2016-2021.

**By**

**Mbadiwe Jeremiah, PhD**
**Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,**
**Faculty of Humanities,**
**University of Port Harcourt**
**Email: mbadiwejeremiah@gmail.com**

**Abstract**

This paper examined the formation of community Vigilante and its impact on National Security using OSAPC in Rivers State as a case study. Both primary and secondary sources were used in order to interact with members and non-members of OSPAC. The result indicated that Nigeria police is ineffective with regard to crime control and as such, vigilante groups in their current forms sprang up to make up for this ineffectiveness. It also showed that vigilante groups are gaining prominence as agents of crime control in contemporary Nigeria, particularly in Rivers State. The paper equally revealed that vigilante group members are recruited and monitored through their communities and that they are effective in grass-root crime control. Howbeit, lack of firearms, poor funding and lack of patrol vehicles remain the major problems confronting vigilante groups. Conclusively, the paper holds that the best way of solving the problem of crime in Nigeria in this new normal world is by recognizing and increasing the activities of community vigilante groups within the frame work of state and national laws.

**Keywords:** Community Vigilante, Security, OSPAC, National Laws

## Introduction

There seems to be no contention as regards the strategic relevance of security in the development of any nation. The security of lives and property in any given state or community is paramount and remains vital to the continued Socio-economic survival of the people. Ezeoha (2011: 35) observed that security involves stability and continuity of livelihood, predictability of relationships, feeling of safe and belonging to a social group. Therefore, peace, safety and security are both necessary and indispensable requirements for development and the attainment of good quality of life for any human society. They provide the requisite enabling environment for citizens to live and work towards social, economic and political development of the society.

However, in recent times Nigeria and indeed, Rivers state, has witnessed an unprecedented plaque of crisis and insecurity, each leading to loss of lives and destruction of properties. Unfortunately, social lives in Rivers State has remained largely characterized by fear and insecurity in a manner that suggests that the state lacks the capacity to discharge its security functions especially that of policing. The presence of fear and insecurity, no doubt, stifles the human capacity to develop and this heavily compromises the dignity and quality of life both individual and the society.

Formal policing structure which involves a body of men recruited and paid by the state to enforce law and maintain order is a recent development in human history. In traditional society, policing was the responsibility of every adult in the community. All adults were obliged to contribute towards the prevention and control of crime and disorder. This was achieved through the system of "hue cry and pursuit" and the "watch and ward" that preceded the emergence of the state (Martin, 1990: 62). Prior to colonial rule, institutions like council of elders and masquerade cults were very indispensable in ensuring community peace, safety and security of various Nigerian communities. Formal colonial rule came with state policing as an instrument of coercion and maintenance of law and order in the colonial state of Nigeria. It is in the light of this that the delivery of safety and security is considered a justifiable public good and the very essence of the state (Lubuva, 2004: 54).

Today, the socio-political and economic landscape of Nigeria has been blighted by endemic twin evil of crime and violence. In the South-South geo-political zone especially, in Rivers State, it has become plagued by armed militancy and gang violence. Most of these crimes are perpetrated by young adults with slightly older men as leaders. In order to curb this menace, communities began to inaugurate and institute community vigilantes in which the Onelga security planning and Advisory committee (OSPAC) became the most popular. The formation, activities, prospects and effects of this militia agency forms the major thrust this paper especially in the current post- Covid-19 era.

**Emergence of Ospac in Rivers State**

Ospac is an acronym for ONELGA Security planning and Advisory Committee. It is a community vigilante group that was first formed and noctured in Omoku in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State. It is an unregistered community based private security agency and was inaugurated to fight insurgency in the area. Members were recruited from all the various communities in ONELGA especially repentant cultists from Greenlander and Icelander which were the prominent cult group in the area.

Prior to its formation, cult violence has been a regular feature in Rivers State's Socio-political setting for more than two decades. From the mid 1990's a wave of militarization occurred among confraternities' leading to broader militarization of the society. 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 the present day. Beginning from 2014 the activities of the cult groups became prevalent and spreading rapidly over a wide geographical region in Rivers State. Cult violence took on various criminal, militant, communal or political undertones depending on the situation. For instance, in 2015 alone, there occurred over twenty (20) cult clashes leading to the death of over 100 persons with so many maimed, across the state (Akpila, 2019: 20).

Consequently, cult groups were consolidated to the extent that they began to be hired by crime syndicates to provide on-site security and administer criminal routes which later led them to become enmeshed in the illegal oil bunkering market as well as in the drugs and weapons trade. Cult groups became highly active and recruited youths to their ranks to help defend and expand their territory. In Rivers State, these cult groups have wide geographical penetration as they overlap with street gangs, criminal syndicates, youth associations, and other militia settings (Allison, 2014: 375). Notable among these cult groups were the notorious Deebam, Deywell, Greenlander, Icelander and the less known Doctor's squad, Italians, Blood hunters, Junior Vikings, Bermudas and others. Their criminal activities were more noticeable in Ogba, Egbema, Ndoni, Emohua, Ikwerre, Khana, Gokana, Ahoada Kalabari, Audoni and Okrika areas of Rivers State.

In all, ONELGA witnessed the highest display of cult rivalries leading to the killing and kidnapping of several persons in the Local Government. On 3rd April, 2015, one Chief Christopher Nwalinsor Adube and his three children were killed in Obrikom; on 12th February 2016, 24 persons were killed in Omoku during the legislative election re-run; on 15th March, 2016 some suspected cultists cut off the head of one Franklin Obi, an APC ward Chairman, and several other casualties just to mention but a few. Consequently, between February and September 2016 the activities of rival cult groups turned Omoku the local government headquarters of ONELGA into a ghost town. During this period of heightened insecurity and violent conflicts in ONELGA, there was a name that evoked fear on the general public. This was one Ejma Igwedibia (a.k.a Don Waney), a notorious cultist. While he lived he was described as the lord of the manor who dared to walk where angels feared to tread. He enjoyed patronage from multi-national oil companies and politicians. In the

cause of time he became more ruthless and a menace to the society. As Don Waney and his likes began to fight over compensations from crude oil it resulted to more loss of lives and properties. People were killed, house were burnt down and properties worth millions of naira were destroyed. Community member fled to other cities for safety.

It was a reaction to these attendant social ills perpetrated by the cult groups that led to the formation of Onelga Security Planning and Advisory Committee (OSPAC). The body drew its membership from all the communities that make up Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area. On October, 2019 a bye-law establishing its operation was assented to by the Rivers State Governor as contained in sub-section (4) of section (1) of law No.8 of 2018. The group is empowered to assist the Nigeria police to perform its constitutional functions of protecting lives and properties. The OSPAC members are however expected to hand over arrested criminals to the police because they are not empowered to detain. From ONELGA as its headquarters, Ospac has been introduced and inaugurated in several local governments of the state. They operate from the communities as their presence is visibly seen in every community in the state. They work hand in hand with the formal police.

**Organization and Activities of Ospac Security Out-Fit**

The organizational structure of Ospac is highly regimented with the commander at the apex. Other positions or ranks such as deputy commander, secretary, public relations officer, Chief security officers of the various units in the community are also created. The newly recruited members are usually trained at Omoku where they are taught the rudiments of security and intelligence sourcing.

Oaths are administered on members to ensure that membership betrayal is avoided. Checking points are created at strategic points especially on road junctions where several link roads criss-crossed the community. Like the formal police force, members of Ospac carry out patrols both day night to ensure that criminals are checkmated. Defaulting members of Ospac are often arrested and detained, suspended and sometimes dismissed from militia groups depending on the degree of offense committed.

The major responsibility of Ospac security outfit is to provide security of lives and properties of members of the community in particular and the state at large. As observed by Ajayi (2015: 62), security borders on safety and the absence of dangerous conditions. This is because its absence threatens the survival of individuals and their properties. Consequently, OSPAC, like the formal police has devised various means of containing and

managing security to achieve the lowest possible crime rate with minimal resource expenditure.

Obviously the activities of OSPAC security outfit in Rivers State communities have gained prominence. They play crucial roles in protecting government facilities such as office complexes and critical infrastructures located within communities. Ekhomu (2013:57) noted that the private security outfits serve as an instrumental ally in the fight against crime in the new strategic policing. He emphasized that they function as important assets in the intelligence architecture of policing in Nigeria.

Although the global community is persistently transiting from traditional form of policing to a more systematic and formalized community policing, there is indeed a paradigm shift from traditional police system to community participatory system of community policing. As crime advertently increases, the government, particularly its criminal justice system is accused of failing to control and maintain security. The lives of citizens are left unsafe and insecured in the environment (Waripere, 2014:3). Owing to the frequent rise in the rate of crime, individuals, states and nations are devising means of curbing the menaces associated with it. In Rivers State, the case is not different. This misconduct continues to devastate and ravage many lives and properties, and the rural communities become the most culprit. It is against this backdrop that the rural communities in Rivers State have to borrow a leaf from Omoku. Thus, four out of the twenty-three local government areas in Rivers State have adopted and inaugurated their own OSPAC security outfits. These areas include Ogba, Egbema, Ndoni, Rundele, Odegu, Emohua, Ogbakiri, Aluu, Akpor, Igwuruta, Omagwa and Eneka communities. Each community domesticated its militia outfit to soothe the existing social structure of the environment.

To fund the activities of the OSPAC security outfit, communities embark on levies on their citizens. In some communities, certain security fees were collected from shop owners, market traders, fuel stations, Block industries, Bakeries, Mechanic workshops, Hotels, Timber shops, land developers, and other private investments. Since their services do not stop at their immediate locality but extend to other areas in their respective Local Government Areas, the Local Government Chairmen from time to time also release some funds to the body in order to ease their jobs. Patrol vehicles are also donated to them by some concerned individuals and philanthropists to facilitate their patrol.

**Challenges of Ospac Security System**

OSPAC, as a private security agency is faced with by myriads of problems. Firstly, there is the challenge of in adequate funding as the local government cannot adequately provide

the necessary funds needed to ensure effective discharge of their duties. Lack of adequate fund hinder on-the-job training of members of the security outfit. Members are usually given only physical fitness training while they do not know several other aspects of security training like intelligence collecting and analysis, martial arts, crowd control, riot control, data management, and automated data analysis in crime mitigation. The existence of poor training accounts for the irregularities observed in their operational mode and the unconventional ways of their duty discharge (Akpila, 2019:36).

Closely related to poor funding is the existence of poor remuneration and this accounts for their brutality and overzealousness in the discharge of their duties. There have been reports of undue brutality meted out on innocent citizens by OSPAC guards in their course of trying to provide their security needs. It is this singular act that most times has attracted criticisms against their operation inspite of their initial public acceptance.

Another major challenge facing OSPAC security outfit in Rivers State is lack of arms. Although their operations are recognized by the Rivers State government but there is a prohibition of the use of firearms by private security outfits. Besides, the body is not registered with the Nigeria security and Civil Defence Corps which is the regulatory agency in charge of registration and regulation of all the private security agencies in Nigeria (NSCDC, 2003). Consequently, the security outfit operates without licence but with mere conventional recognition by the various local government councils.

**Ospac in the Post-Covid-19 Era**

Obviously, in the short period of OSPAC operation in Rivers State, there has been reasonable peace and sanity to community life. The killings, kidnapping, violent conflicts and wanton destructions of properties that characterized the pre-covid and actual covid-19 period in the state were stemmed down by the operations of the OSPAC guards.

During the covid-19 era, citizens were both faced with the problem of the covid-virus, hunger, kidnapping, cult clashes, destruction of properties and above all, lack of free movement. Families were faced with various hardships. However, when OSPAC became accepted by the public, their activities brought to the bearest minimum the incessant occurrence of cult clashes, killings and destruction of houses and other properties. The peace brought about by the existence of OSPAC is sustained even in the post covid-19 era. In Ogba for instance, people who abandoned their homes and fled because of the frequent clashes between the Icelanders and the Greenlanders and the various warring factions have resettled back in their homes. Conflicts between the youths, community leaders and the oil host families have subsided to a great extent in the various communities where they

have been rife (Nwosu, 2017:44). In the words of Akpila (2019:39), "people can now sleep with their two eyes closed". Again, the Port Harcourt-Rumuji-Elele-Ahoada-Warri road and the Port Harcourt -Owerri road that were flash points for high-way robbery and kidnapping were brought to absolute control by the operations of the OSPAC outfits. Many of the criminals were arrested and handed over to the police for prosecution. Another instance is the Elele-Egbeda-Omoku road which used to be a den for kidnappers. But with the advent of OSPAC, calmness and safety was restored to the road users. OSPAC guards during this periods, severally ambushed the criminals, arrested them and sometimes carried out jungle justice on them.

In realizing the fact that the maintenance of peace and security is an issue of concern to practically all societies round globe, it becomes important that community policing should be taken serious by all citizens of the society with police in combating crimes. Therefore, in this Covid-19 era looking at the achievements of OSPAC within their few years of existence in Rivers State, it becomes necessary for both the federal and state governments, to recognize and create a new department of home security and new department of national intelligence that would empower the community security outfits such as OSPAC to carry firearms in the execution of their duties. This is because the OSPAC guards are sometimes over-powered by some criminal guards who possess sophisticated weapons. The fear of being ambushed by criminals with those sophisticated weapons is seriously affecting recruitment of new members as many OSPAC guards are killed on daily basis.

Importantly too, it will be worthy to note that practical public-private security sector co-operation arrangement is lacking in Nigeria. The little co-operation that exist between the private and public security sector only exist in theory (Nwosu, 2017:56). Although these private security outfits such as OSPAC in Rivers State, Bakassi Boys in the South-east, and the OPC in the Southwest have played significant roles in complementing the activities of police, there still exist lack of co-operation and co-ordination between the two bodies. Therefore to maximally exploit the potentials of the community security outfits in this post Covid-19 era, the government should create a synergy between the public and private security outfits in Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

Observably, it is a fact that the public security agencies seemed to be overwhelmed by the pattern and level of crime existent in the society and as such, are no longer able to maintain peace and order in the country. Their inability to adequately provide security needs of various segments of the society and failure to address the mounting problems of conflicts and crime nonetheless created a vacuum in the country's security management, hence the

emergence of community security vigilantes, which OSPAC is one. The success of OSPAC in security management is evident in the current peace and stability enjoyed in Rivers State. Their unique mode of operation and justice system is highly commendable and as such, government should adequately fund their operations and grant them the use of specified firearms in order to ease their operations as far as control of crime and violence in the Nigeria Society is concerned.

**Reference**

Abbo, H. D. (2005), Threat of Terrorism in Nigeria: Implications for National Security. Benin: Res Publishers.

Abimbola, P., & Jegede A. E. (2006), Poverty and Ethnic Militia Activities in the Niger Delta: A Critical Appraisal. Lagos: Mallious Press Ltd.

Alisson, T. A. (2014), The Struggle: Genealogy of Militancy. Port Harcourt: Zenith Graphics.

Apila, Z. B. (2019), A History of Ospac Security in Abua/Odu Local Government Area of Rivers State. B. A. project, Uniport.

Bruce, D. & Komane, I. (2008), Corp and Vigilante: Police Attitude Towards Street Justice, Crime and Conflict.

Ezeoha, F. (2011), Causes and Effects of National Security in Nigeria. Enugu: IPF Printers.

Harmon, H. (2009), "Imperative for Peace in the Niger Delta", Business Day, July, 9.

Hutchful, E. (2001), Security and Law and Order. Journal of Africa Development. Senegal: Codesiro.

Jaja, I. O. (1996), Law and Crime. Owerri: Cooperate Impression.

Johnson, L. (1996), What is Vigilantism? British Journal of Criminology.

Klockars, G. B. (1985), The Idea of Police. Beverly Hills: Sage Publishers.

Martins, N. (1987), Contemporary Crises: Law, Crime and Social Policy. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.

Nwosu, D. E. (2017), Internal Security Operation and Human Rights Violation in Nigeria: A Case Study of Niger Delta. B. A. project, University of Port Harcourt.

Ogunike, Kingsley, Oral interview, 25th September, 2021.

Ojalorutu, V. (2004), Militants and Oil Violence in the Niger Delta. Yenagoa: Treasure Communication Resources Ltd.

Udeorah, S. (2006), Cultism: Death Trap on Our Campus and the Way Out. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.

Wali, Obinuchi, Oral Interview, 20th September, 2021.