The Management of the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme: Issues and Perspectives

By

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Abstract

The declaration of Presidential Amnesty for Niger Delta militants by the Government of late President Umaru Yar' Adua could be likened to a proverbial problem tree that needed to be cut down. If you prune its branches and leave the roots intact, logically the tree will grow again after a period of time. This analogy explains the amnesty programme, the implementation of which is nothing but a palliative approach without solving the root causes of conflict .This paper, The Management of the Niger Delta Amnesty Programme: Issues and Perspectives takes a look at the Presidential Amnesty Programme offered to Niger Delta militants and raises concerns about its real benefits to the ex-agitators vis-à-vis the generality of the people and its prospects for achieving sustainable peace in the region. Using the descriptive and analytic method, the study relied on primary and secondary sources in the collection of data. The paper notes that, the amnesty programme of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration are only elementary stages in peace building and is not comprehensive enough to address the core issues the Niger Delta. It

further observes that isolated cases of post amnesty disturbances in the Niger Delta is indicative of the fact that government is not sincere in its promises to the ex-agitators and the managers of the programme lack either financial frugality or are administratively inept. The research concludes that a credible and dependable rehabilitation programme for the ex-agitators is a sine qua none in checkmating militancy, while the application of justice, equity and fair play in handling the demands of oil producing minorities may holistically address the teething problems of the region.

Keywords: Ex-militants, Agitators, Delegates, Warlords, Generals. Commanders and Freedom fighters.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region, rich in biodiversity due to its many rivers, freshwater and mangrove forest that harbours many aquatic and wildlife, is mostly occupied by the ijaw (izon) ethnic nationality, with the Itsekiri, Isoko, Urhobo, Ogoni and many others constituting the minority group. Their way of life is influenced by the natural environment. The presence of many rivers, rivulets, creeks and creeklets, streams, canals etc. is the reason why fishing forms the predominant economic activity, although subsistence farming as well as trade and transportation forms part of their economic life. They had had economic and cultural ties with their immediate and distant neighbours in relatively peaceful manner, although disagreements, civil strife and sometimes wars characteristics of all human existence were noticeable, but not in a scale that is known today.

However, upon contact with the outside world, particularly during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and in the colonial era when palm oil and its allied products became major export commodities, their ways of life became affected. Their traditional economy suffered a setback. The capitalist economy in all its shade became introduced and overran the pre-colonial traditional mode of production. The colonial economic policies such as taxation, wage labour, forceful cultivation of cash crops were not in agreement with the local system known to them and this affected both the existing market system during and after colonialism as well as the political economy of the Niger delta as elsewhere (Ama-Ogbari, 2021).

The British who had consolidated a foothold in Delta named it the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1884, expanded it few years later and renamed it the Niger Cost Protectorate in 1893 and by 1900 amalgamated it with the Southern part of the territory to form the Colony and Protectorate of Sothern Nigeria (Anene, 1952:20-26). By 1914 the Southern and Northern Protectorates were married to become Nigeria, a name derived from the Niger territory and by extension an enlarged Delta (Anene, 1952: 22-26).

The amalgamation rather than unite the two Nigerias polarised it. It brought into existence three dominant groups namely- Yoruba in the west, Hausa/Fulani in the North and Igbo in the East. The 1946 Richard's constitution apparently affirms this ethnic cleavage when it introduced regionalism in Nigeria. According to Ejituwu & Enemugwen (2007:77), the formation of political parties in Nigeria at the time reflected this ethnic coloration. The National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon (NCNC) became an Igbo dominated party in the East, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) was identified as Hausa/Fulani party and the Action Group (AG) was associated with the Yoruba. Outside the major groups were smaller ones referred to as the minorities, prominent amongst them were the Ijaws (Izons) who were palpably afraid that in the event that Nigeria gained independence, they would be subsumed by the three dominant ethnic groups and it was this fear that led to many protest movements at the eve of Nigeria's independence - a fear the colonial government, though addressed it with the setting up of the Sir Henry Willink Commission of 1957, but did not satisfy the locals.

By 1956, when crude petroleum oil was discovered in commercial quantity by Shell D' Arcly in the Delta at Ikotopri in Oloibiri district in present day Bayelsa state, Derefaka & Okorobia (2007: 193), the high expectations and euphoria that came with its discovery soon became their greatest nightmare. The Oil proceeds were not felt in the region but elsewhere outside and oil as described by Odogu (2021) became the 'sick-man' of the nation, being the least developed both in physical infrastructure and in socio-economic terms. This neglect is the driving force that propelled the youths of the area to vent their anger on both the multinational companies and the government and precipitated militancy in the Niger Delta. The concomitant effect of which led to the advisability of declaration of amnesty for the militants. This discourse will therefore, take a cursory look at the implementation

of the amnesty programme and examinie the issues arising thereof and what ought to be done (the perspectives) and then draw conclusion.

Geographical Location of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is bounded to the north by Aboh, the Benin River to the west, and Imo River to the Eastern side and swamp forests from the Atlantic Ocean to the south by a collection of mangroves (Imovbore & Gundlack, 1977). It is said to be Africa's largest delta measuring about 7,000 square kilo meters, one third of it is made up of wetlands, and believed to be the largest mangrove forest according to Alagoa & Tamuno, (2009: 12), and the third largest wetland in the world second to Mississippi and Pantana (Iroh, 2020: 182). It is characterized by three geographical belts namely: the sandy beach belt at the Atlantic seabed, the salt water as well as the fresh water belts (Ogbari, 2009: 11).

The Niger Delta, as it is known to many today was artificially (though arguably) expanded to cover all nine oil-producing states of the South-South geo-political region of Nigeria. Thus the states of Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers are now in the political map of the Niger Delta. The decision was the product of a political arrangement created by the Administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo in 2000 to assuage certain political interests for the sake of development purposes. However, historical and cartographical evidences as affirmed by both the Sir Henry Willink Commission's report of 1958 and that of the 1997 Niger Delta Environmental Survey refers to the former three divisions of Ogoni, Degema and Brass together with the western Ijaws as the core Niger Delta (Akinyele, 1966: 71-94). Going by their report, the present Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states metamorphosed from these three divisions and is therefore, the core Niger Delta Region. Going by this historical antecedence, the core Niger Delta region is therefore, classified into four namely: the Western Delta its fringe, the Eastern and its fringe, the Northern Delta and the Central Delta (Alagoa, 2005:197-210).

The Early Economy of the Niger Delta

There is no gain saying the fact that, the Niger Delta from pre-colonial through the colonial times to the present had had an overbearing contact with the outside world, particularly western nations which created different types of crisis in the

area. The activities of different agents, particularly European traders, administrators/ colonialists and lately some multinationals had either direct or indirect precipitated the crisis in the region. In recent time, the activities of multinational oil companies generated reactions, particularly among the locals in oil-bearing communities that made the Niger Delta "unsafe" for both foreigners and the Nigerian peoples alike and this led to the declaration of the Presidential Amnesty.

As we have noted above, the Niger Delta environment is crisscrossed with many rivers, creeks, canals, tributaries and the Atlantic Ocean. This natural endowment dictated the type of occupation. Expectedly, fishing is the predominant occupation and is done all round the year around the coastal lines. However, in the fresh water belt the abundance of arable land with forest resources support the cultivation of food and cash crops. Furthermore, lumbering and rearing of domestic animals, hunting of games, palm front gathering and palm oil production, canoe carving, wood and craft works equally hold sway. These economic activities were carried out at subsistence level just to provide for the immediate household, but with time, the scope was expanded and the surpluses were exchanged with their immediate and distant neighbours alike. Obaro Ikime (1969:5) described it as "south-south, north-north, east-west and west-east trade".

In the 15th century, when the Portuguese traders arrived the delta territory, the traditional economy had begun to experience some changes. The Niger Delta people, taking advantage of their strategic location became active middlemen between the European merchants and the hinterland traders (Obaro Ikime, 1969: 6). The shift of attention to partake of the emerging new economic order stifled the traditional economic growth. This situation became compounded with the coming of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and later the trade in palm produce. Traditional means of livelihood which had sustained families were neglected or abandoned. The colonial era dealt even a heavier blow on the economy of the people with the introduction of some obnoxious and alien economic policies by the capitalist bourgeoisie. Forced and wage labour, taxation, introduction of modern printed currency and banks and many more became issues they were to grapple with. In all of these, traditional economic activities even in the face of 'suffocation' still managed to satisfy local needs. However, post-colonial Nigeria marked a

watershed in the economic life of the people particularly with the discovery and exploitation of crude petroleum and gas. Petro dollar economy made other economic activities less attractive for two reasons: first, the locals now sought to look for avenues offered by the emerging oil industry to make quick money and shy away from other economic activities and secondly, the operations of the oil prospecting companies had destroyed the environment and made traditional occupations less profitable. The latter reason appears to be the last straw that broke the camel's back. It led to agitations, protests and militancy.

An Overview of the Niger Delta Crises

Agitations in the Niger Delta pre-date the discovery and exploitation of crude petroleum oil. First, in the pre-colonial era, the Niger Delta potentates vehemently resisted the attempts made by European administrators to diplomatically lure them into signing the so-called protection treaties. Again, there were also attempts made by European merchants to circumvent the African middlemen and forcefully penetrate the hinterlands to get to the source of supply of slaves and raw materials. These were all resisted. The bold and determined manner in which these nationalists of the time- King Jaja of Opobo, King Pepple of Bonny, King Koko of Nembe and Nana of Itsekiri and others outside the region resisted and fought for their 'rights' are too familiar to warrant further details.

In the colonial era, particularly in the eve of Nigeria's political independence (1954-60) the institutionalization of regionalism in the 1956 Richard's constitution bred minority ethnic discontent and opened another round of protests and agitations. There was palpable fear among the minority ethnic groups that in the emerging nationhood, they would be subsumed by the three major ethnic groups of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo and the Ijaws took the lead to agitate for the creation of Cross-River-Ogoja-River (COR) states. The River State creation movement led by Hebron Tom George and others like Chief P.G Wamate, Chief Melford Okilo, His Royal Majesty Francis Alagoa, Mingi X of Nembe, Chief Napoleon Graham Douglas, Ken Saro Wiwa and many more drew the attention of the British Parliament through copies of memoranda to the effect that the Willink Commission's report did recognize the Riverine people as a peculiar group in the Eastern region (Ella Prest, 2017). Their agitations led to the appointment of the first

Commission in the colonial era known as the Sir Henry Willink Commission of 1957 to seek ways of addressing the fears of the minorities.

The report of the Commission did not satisfy the locals and agitations continued. This led to the insurrection of Major Jasper Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw nationalist and soldier who led others to declare the Niger Delta Republic in 1966 and fought with federal forces for twelve days before they were overwhelmed (Isaac Boro, 1982: 1-158). According to Igali (2019), Boro and others placed their beliefs and commitments before their lives. That is the spirit of the Niger Delta people. Little wonder, Alagoa, (2000) remarked that, "History has never failed to record the Ijaws as merely weak fisher-folks, farmers, canoe carvers, traders, gin brewers etc. but had rather stood to the test at all times by showing their capacity and strength to challenge their oppressors whether they are European merchants or Portuguese traders". They have at different times in history stood up against intruders and exploiters. That same spirit manifested in post-colonial Nigeria after the discovery and exploitation of crude petroleum oil and gas when the Nigerian state, the multinational companies and their collaborators decided to shortchange them with the oil resources derived from land their land for the benefit of others.

What the inhabitants of the region have been experiencing over the past decades according to the Niger Delta Watch is that, the Niger Delta has been overrun through deliberate over exploitation carried out in total disregard to best environmental practices. Heavy hydro-carbon pollution of surface and subsurface waters has destroyed fishes and other marine organisms to the extent that most of the inhabitants of oil-bearing communities have been forcefully evicted from their ancestral lands (Niger Delta Watch, 2017). Worrisome as this situation is, there is a feeling among the oil-bearing communities that much is taking from them without corresponding benefits. The oil benefits are felt elsewhere more than the region which was why perhaps Yakubu Gowon, (2008:1) remarked that "the vast improvement in our social and other infrastructure have been made possible through the country's oil wealth"[22]. But that wealth which comes to the region is not commensurate with what is taken out. Admittedly Yakubu Gowon is of the opinion that the oil industry seem not to have been managed properly to avoid the problem it has created and it is that mismanagement that has led to the movement for self-determination in the form of protests, call for resource control and

militancy in the region. Okolo, (2004: 3) corroborated this assertion when he stated that the woes of the Niger Delta people is compounded by the politics of derivation in revenue allocation, the failure of oil companies to respond to their corporate social responsibilities, failure in governance at all tiers couched in endemic corruption, lack of accountability and transparency. This paradox led to litigations, protests, agitations and outright militancy in the Niger Delta. Few instances are discernable.

In the 1990, Ken Saro-wiwa, an environmental civil rights activist adopted a non-violent strategy under the banner of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) to demand among other things the correction of environmental issues in Ogoni land (Ibeama & Luckham, 2006:39). He could not live to tell the story as he was gruesomely killed by hanging in 1995. In the same year 1990, Umuechem Community in Ethie Local Government Area of Rivers State was completely burnt down by Mobile Police Force on the promptings of the Anglo Dutch transnational oil company, Shell and scores of innocent and defenceless protesters killed (Social Action, 2017). In 1992 the Movement for the Survival of the Izon Ethic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND) presented an Izon People's Charter to the government and People of Nigeria with an appeal to the international community for urgent intervention. They wanted the issue of state creation and the revenue allocation formulae applied to oil income addressed, the right to control the use of oil and gas and all other resources found in their territory among other demands. (Izon People's Charter, 19920). In a similar manner, fifty-two traditional rulers from the Ogbia kingdom, the territory from where the first oil well was discovered, in a Charter drafted by the Movement for Reparation to Ogbia (Oloibiri) (MORETO) in 1992 demanded for the repealing of the constitutional provisions appropriating all minerals to the federal government and to restore at least 50% of their rights to the ownership of oil and payment to the landlords of the area "all rents and royalties from the revenue from crude oil since 1956 (0gbia People Charter,1992). In 1998, youths from more than five hundred communities from about 40 clans representing 25 organizations cutting across the length and breadth of the Niger Delta gathered at the ancient town of Kaiama to deliberate on the best way to ensure the continuous survival of the indigenous people of the Ijaw ethnic nationality within the Nigerian state. The Kaiama Declaration desired that "All land and natural resources (including mineral

resources) within the ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival"(Kaiama Declaration, 1998) On 30th November, 1999, Odi town in Kolokuma/Opokuma local government area was sacked by federal forces under the government of former President Olusegun Obasanjo. It was a reprisal attack following the killing of twelve police officers by an armed gang led by one Ken Niweigha. Although there was no apparent identifiable political agenda that could be linked to this gruesome act even though the gang used some of the rhetoric of Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) that was agitating for fair share of the oil proceeds, the Human Rights Watch, (2000) stated that it may not be unconnected with the rising clamor from the oil producing areas for a greater share of the oil wealth. However, establishing a concrete nexus between the motive of the gang and the Niger delta struggle remains elusive and contentious.

With these and other unreported developments, tension in the region was building up. By 2009, it got to a point that the revenue from oil proceeds which accounts for 95 of export earnings and about 85% of government revenues started to decline. Akuru & Okoro (2011:1-6) reported that crude oil production "nose-dived" from 2.433 bbl. /d in 2006 to 2.211 bbl. /d in 2009 and going down further as a result of disruptions of oil company operations by youths of the Niger Delta. The shut-down of the Nigerian economy that depended majorly on oil resources was only but a matter of time. The desperation by the Nigerian government to wriggle itself out of this looming economic catastrophe 'compelled' the government of Umar Musa Yar' Adua to declare presidential amnesty for the militant youths of the region to lay down their arms and be incorporated into a development programme.

The Presidential Amnesty Programme and its Managers

The introduction of the Presidential Amnesty Porgramme for the ex-militants (delegates) according to Dabby (2021) took a cue from the Bayelsa state amnesty programme put in place by the administration of Chief Timipre Sylva. As governor of the state, Chief Sylva had granted amnesty to some Niger Delta militant commanders known as "generals" in the persons of Ebikabowei Victor Ben alias General Boyloaf, Eric Paul alias General Ugunboss, Africa Okparasia alias General Africa, Pastor Reuben and others to lay down their arms as their activities spelt dire consequences for the economy of the state. About 500 barrels

of oil production were shut daily. The amnesty granted to them led to relative peace in the region and oil production level again soared and then a 'Peace House' located at the Azikoro axis in Yenagoa was established. It was the success of the Bayelsa experience that inspired Governor Sylva to sell the idea of amnesty to the presidency that its offer could be a way out for the nation to avert a looming economic danger posed by the activities of the aggrieved youths. Crude oil production was disrupted as a result of the activities of the militants leading to loss of billions of United States dollars and there were serious security implications for their action. The presidency therefore, on the prompting of Governor Sylva according to Dabby, started consultations with different 'Ijaw' leaders on how to douse the tension in the region although there were other issues. Some of the leaders contacted according to Toriomo (2021), and who later became members and signatories to the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta included: Dr. Ledum Mitee, Chairman, Chief Charles Uwensuyi Edosomwan, Obongawan Grace Ekong, Amb. (Prof.) Lawrence Ekpebu, Brig. Gen. Cletus Emein, Chief John Anderson Eseimokumo, Hon. Nduese Essien, Abom Tony Esu, Chief Timi Alaibe, Dr, Sam Amadi, Mr, Sam Amuka-Pemu and Etubon Anthony Asuquo and others. Inaugurating the committee in 2008, Ebele Goodluck Jonathan remarked "…the Committee, is therefore expected to collate, review and distil the various reports, suggestions and recommendations on the Niger Delta from Sir Henry Willinks Commission Report… to the Report of the National Political Reform Conference (2005)". He further remarked that the technical committee was inaugurated to come up with recommendations that will lead to "the urgent resolution of the crisis in the Region" (Jonathan, 2008). One of the recommendation made was for the presidency to proclaim amnesty for Niger Delta militants. This was quickly effected, perhaps because of its perceived gains to quieten the region for optimal exploitation of the oil resources to boost the national economy, while other recommendations were pushed to the back seat.

The amnesty progrmmme was to last for an initial time frame of 60 days to run between 6th of August to 4th of October, during which time the militants were expected to lay down their arms to be assembled at designated screening centres in the region (Xan Rice, 2009). The entire programme was designed to be in three phases-disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The first phase required the militants to surrender their weapons, the second phase involved

training/rehabilitation programmes at Obubra in Cross River State to be done in batches for one month to re-orientate, counsel and morally rejuvenate them to keep their physical and spiritual sanctity away from further unpatriotic acts. During the rehabilitation programme, they were asked to choose different careers such as welding of oil and gas pipelines, marine services, fabrication and welding technology, exploration, production and processing technology, education among other vocations. They were then sent abroad for training. The third phase was reintegrating them back to society upon their return with a promise of payment of N65, 000 monthly stipend with other incentives for them to start a new life. To fulfill these, an administrative machinery with a secretariat was put in place. An Amnesty office was established and sited in the Nation's capital, Abuja and a Coordinator was appointed to manage the programme. The question is, where those called-up for service lived up to expectation?

The Managers of the Amnesty Programme

Upon its introduction, the amnesty programme was directly placed under the office of Mr. President and Navy Capt. Kaleb Olubolade (Rtd.) was appointed to only supervise and coordinate the disarmament of those who were prepared to surrender their weapons which was the first phase of the programme. Put difrerently, Olubolade was only to collect the arms from them. The process kick-started with Boy Loaf, Ateke Tom, Tom Polo, Farah Dagogo and Chief Bibopreghe Ajube alias 'Shoot-at-sight'. These were popularly referred to as the "big five". According to Dabby and Tebegha (2021) the 'big five' were the first set to surrender their weapons and signed a deal with the federal government. These and other 'Generals' (warlords or commanders) were then sent to Obubra, Cross River state for a six months orientation programme to free their mindset from belligerent activities to a positive one. They were basically trained in peace building and thereafter sent to different overseas countries to learn different vocations. The presidency then appointed Air Vice Marshal Lucky Ochuko Ararile as the pioneer Coordinator of the programme on 25th June, 2009.

While this process was ongoing Samson Dabby, President, Amnesty Vendors Forum stated that, another group of delegates began to agitate and clamored to be part of the programme and the federal government, seeing that the first phase was yielding positive results conceded to their demand and gave them another six

months' timeline to surrender their arms. At this time, the Presidency had appointed Chief Undutimi Alaibe to succeed Ararila as the Special Assistant to the President on Niger Delta and Coordinator of the Presidential Amnesty. The programme was overseen by a Board with the Coordinator as its Chairman and the big Five as members. So the second batch delegates were equally incorporated into the programme and its 'generals' and the foot soldiers were sent abroad for training. He stated that it was during Chief Alaibe's time that the second phase (Demobilization) of the Programme started in full scale.

Following Chief Alaibe's resignation in 2011 to contest the Governorship election of Bayelsa State, Hon. Kingsley Kemebradigha Kuku was appointed Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta Affairs and Chairman of the Presidential Amnesty Office. During his time, another group came up agitating to be included in the programme. This was the third batch and after their incorporation, relative peace returned to the Niger Delta and Kuku worked seriously on the demobilization and reintegration phases like his predecessor and concentrated more on education and training (Dabby, 2021). During his tenure many youths who were sent abroad for training were absorbed in public offices including the amnesty office.

In 2015, the amnesty programme was shifted from the office of the President to the office of the National Security Adviser (NSA) and Brigadier General Paul T. Boroh was recommended for the position as Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta Affairs and Coordinator, Presidential Amnesty Programme. According to Dabby, President of the Amnesty Vendors Forum, the National Security Adviser, Babagana Monguno and Boroh, the coordinator lacked the competence, experience and knowledge about the issues that led to the amnesty and so they began to run the programme like a military affair and it ran into troubled waters. The Amnesty Vendors Forum president claimed that the programme became like a conduit pipe through which huge sums of public funds meant to run the programme were syphoned. Similarly, consultants and contractors were not paid and empowerment programmes were closed. It came to a point that some concerned people started agitating for his removal and consequently P.T. Boroh was removed and quizzed by the anti-graft agency, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. This led to his removal.

After his removal Dabby, (2021) stated that the National Security Adviser, Monguno again recommended Prof. Charles Dokubo who was said to be his (Monguno's) teacher at Military College and Dokubo stepped-in as the helms man in March 2018. Dokubu according to the source appeared seemingly interested in paying supply contracts and turned a blind-eye to training and empowerment programmes. Consequently, a group called the Amnesty Vendors Forum, a duly and legally registered body to check-mate the activities of the Amnesty Programme, led by its President started to demand for Dokubo's probe. In an attempt to cover up his 'shady and questionable fake' supply contracts according Dabby, (2021), Dokubo and his Director of Procurement in the Amnesty office in 2019 allegedly arranged and looted the Amnesty ware-house located at Boro town in Olobiri, Kolokuma/ Opokuma local government area of Bayelsa State and carted away truck-loads of empowerment materials meant for resettlement of ex-agitators. The looting went on for nearly two weeks and when the locals understood what was going on they joined in the looting spree. Tolumoye Ajoko, (2021), the Paramount ruler of Olobiri Community confirmed the incident, but denied any knowledge of those who spear-headed the incidence or those who partook in it. Although the leadership of the Ijaw Youth Council rose in defence of Dokubo in a press release, Dokubo was relieved of his appointment three weeks later. His removal thus appeared to fuel the conspiracy theory. He was then replaced with Ambassador A.A. Lawal who was a staff working under Mongulu in the office of the National Security Adviser as Chairman of an interim Board.

Lawal's appointment and the idea of an interim arrangement again sparked-off protests. For eight months in 2020, the Amnesty programme was shut-down but monies were still paid into its account (Dabby, 2021). Again the Vendors Forum threatened to institute legal action against the illegality of an interim Board and demanded to freeze the accounts of the programme. After three months of protest and seeing that the agitation might lead to crisis, Ambassador Lawal was relieved of his appointment and again, on Mongunu's recommendation, Rtd. Col. Milland Dikio was appointed as an interim Administrator of the programme on August 21st 2020. His vision was to redesign the programme to reflect the unique riverine nature and environment and take care of the 31,000 registered ex-agitators. Col. Dikio is also believed to be a loyalist to Mongunu in the army and observers wonder if he could match his promises with action, given the fact that training

programmes are being starved of funds, payment of contractors are selective and empowerment programmes are not pursued with any serious vigor. Soon after his appointment, the euphoria and cheers that greeted his call to duty faded and paved way for jeers and hatred, accusing him of being selective and favouring only his cronies and the South-South ex-agitators called on the president to relieve him of his appointment. According to an ex- militant General, Paul Agge, "The amnesty programme under Dikkio's watch has witnessed a high level nepotism and favouritism. Dikkio only trained those that are close to him or recommended by his friends and associates. He abandoned youths from the creeks of the Niger Delta region who are supposed to be real beneficiaries"…"Dikkio is the worst Coordinator the office has ever had and, therefore, should be removed to pave way for a more competent administrator that understands the dynamics and politics of the struggle (Utomi C.Jerome-Mario: 2022).

In 2022, the presidency yielded to pressure and a new Interim Administrator, Major Gen. Barry Ndiomu was appointed. Ndiomu, on assumption of office revealed that there were about 2,984 students currently benefitting from the Presidential Amnesty scholarships in various higher institutions. The Administrator admitted that there were challenges in the programme over the years, but despite that, between 2015 and 2022, the scheme has produced 121 first-class grades with "tremendous successes in education and skill acquisition" (Mathwe Ogune, 2022). What then are some of these challenges?

Challenges of the Amnesty Programme

At the disarmament stage of the programme, it was realized that some of the militants may have failed to submit all guns and ammunition at their disposal. Two sources, Bariwe and Dabby (2021) in separate interviews appeared to share the same view that the disarmament phase was apparently fraught with insincerity on the part of both the foot soldiers, the field commanders and their warlords (the Generals). While Bariwe claimed that only about 80% of the arms were surrendered, 20% of the most sophisticated weaponry were retained for purposes of self-defence. He noted that the freedom fighters whose interest it is to defend the Niger Delta territory are different from those who blew up oil pipelines or involve in kidnapping for ransom and other vices. The freedom fighters were not part of the Amnesty programme and kept back their weapons, stressing that

even those that turned-in their guns submitted grade two and three types**.** Dabby on his part stated that the delegates had deep distrust and suspicion of the intention of the federal government in the amnesty programme and this made them to surrender only few of their guns and kept back greater amount of the grade one models still in their custody. According to him, the number of guns turned-in (failed to specify the number) when compared to the 31 thousand ex-delegates indicates that not all weapons were submitted. These viewpoints appear to align with those of Ebide, Langer and Tosun (2020) when they argued that it was difficult to determine the reduction of small and light weaponry in the Niger Delta after the disarmament and demobilisation phases, giving the fact that there was no audit carried out to determine precisely the number of arms and armaments owned by the ex-militants prior to the amnesty. Therefore, a cursory look at these claims appear to carry some credibility looking at it from the fact that Asari Dokubo, styled as a freedom fighter and his foot soldiers did not submit his guns and was not part of the Amnesty programme. More so, frequent threats by the ex-delegates to return to the creeks at the slightest provocation suggest that their confidence is anchored on a hidden strength. This again meant that at the disarmament phase, there was failure to establish the exact number of agitators since not all weapons were surrendered and there was no registration of surrendered weapons for effective tracking. It may then be reasonable to argue that the disarmament phase of the programme actually did not fully demobilize the region in terms of the reduction in the quantity of arms in circulation.

The interim Administrator, Major General Barry Tariye Ndiomu alluded to allegations that the data base of the programme was inaccurate, stating that at the time of the disarmament and demobilization stage in 2009, 30 thousand ex-agitators were captured and wondered why the number still remained the same many years after. He observed…"When I took over office, they still had the 30,000 intact, based on our records…"What that means is that, nobody died, nobody graduated from the university and got gainfully employed" (Mathew Ogune, 2022).

Aside the issue of inaccurate data base, there are also improprieties in the payment of the N65, 000 monthly stipends to the ex-agitators. Investigations revealed that, the category of bulk stipends payment made to some of the ex-militant leaders

show that a single leader receives multiple payments in their accounts with single Biometric Verification Number (BVN). What this means is that, a single BVN receives 33 stipend payments of N65, 000 monthly. Ndiomu stated, "We want to understand exactly why an individual had 33 stipend payments into his account" (Matthew Ogun, (2022). The bulk payment as opposed to the single individual payment was conceived from inception of the programme for the militant commanders to receive the bulk sum and in turn expected to disburse to those ex-agitators in the list that were not properly accounted for during the disarmament and demobilization phases. The bulk payment has seemingly become an avenue of shortchanging some, while enriching others. Ndiomu further stated that the amnesty programme had gulped over a trillion naira and that if funds had been properly directed, a lot more could have been achieved. This means that there are leakages and the question therefore, is; who are the perpetrators and their collaborators?

The Ijaw Youth Council, the umbrella body of all the youths of the South –South region, fighting for the wellbeing of the Ijaw ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta pointed accusing fingers at the officials of the Presidential Amnesty Programme, the National Security Adviser, Major General Babagana Monguno and some of its staff in the amnesty office for conspiracy. According to Joseph Oyinkuro, (2021) the National Security Adviser instructed Col. Dikio and some senior staff members of the amnesty office to ensure that he (Dikio) feed- in 40 slots into the oversea training programme before the expected termination date of the programme in 2023, but the plan leaked and payment of over 300 beneficiaries were suspended few weeks before the expiration of Dikio's term in office. Joseph further stated "We have now uncovered reports that Col. Dikio (rtd.) and his close aides, Mr. Alfred Kemepador, Head of Reintegration and Mr. Emmanuel Agiri, Head of Data Management allegedly conspired to use the suspended names to create new beneficiaries for themselves, to enable them receive the N65, 000.00 monthly stipend per beneficiary after they leave office which will run into millions of naira on a monthly basis".

The greatest issue with the Amnesty programme appears to be in the implementation of the rehabilitation phase. Dabby (2021) stated that over 80% of the funds are spent on payment of consultants and contractors, while 20% alone

are committed to rehabilitation of militants. Besides, there is the issue of inflating or over bloating of actual registered list of beneficiaries, irregular and or non-payment of their monthly stipends, huge disparity of allowances between the foot-soldiers and their commanders and generals as well as lack of prospect of employment after their training and politically motivated appointments of coordinators and staffers of the secretariat among others.

Going by these allegations and perhaps many others, it may be reasonable to conclude that, the managers of the programme, the super ex-militant commanders and some officials in the amnesty office have questions to answer as to why the number of ex-agitators under the payroll of the education training programmes are not depleting 14 years after its commencement, giving credence to the alarm raised by the current Coordinator, that the database of the number of ex-agitators still in training is questionable.

The last phase is the reintegration which is to train and reintegrate them into society. It has three units namely: vocational training, education and post-training and empowerment. While the vocational unit places ex-militants in vocational training programmes, the education unit enrolls ex-militants in tertiary education institutions and the post-training empowerment unit takes care of ex- militants who have completed their training to help find employment opportunities (Ebiede, Langer and Tosun 2020). From the initial short term structured five months vocational training in Nigeria, the amnesty administrators restructured it to a long-term training and educational programmes locally and abroad to widen their chances of getting employment in the labour market. According to reports, in 2015 about 15,459, over 50% of the 31,000 ex-delegates had undergone training in different vocations such as boat-building, welding, oil and gas technology, heavy-duty operations, marine technology, aviation, diving etcetera. Although, the programme appears to have successfully trained quite a number of ex-agitators and has produced 121 first-class graduates (Ndiomu, 2023), between 2010 and 2015 only 2,272 had been gainfully employed. However, lack of jobs characterized by the high incidence of unemployment rate in the Niger Delta as elsewhere is one factor that may have hindered their quick reintegration into society.

Despite these challenges, according to Piriye Kiyaramo (2016) the amnesty office, in 2016, started carrying out sustainable reintegration of the ex-agitators through the setting up of means of livelihood (provision of starter parks in different areas) to enable them function properly and take part in the local economy. This phase is designed to give peace back to the communities. These claims in the view of Toriomo (2021) is a mere sham. He claimed that most trainees are abandoned to their fate after their apprenticeship training and payments of the N65, 000 monthly stipends were suspended in 2016 for a very long time. There was apprehension among the rank and file of the ex- agitators. In contrasting his position, an informant, Deinimo Akiyofa (2021) stated that he cannot accept a job payment that would place him below his monthly N65, 000 stipends. In his words "I have a wife and five children. I cannot do a job for someone that will pay me less than my N65, 000 a month. I need money and even the N65, 000 is just for management". The likes of Deinibo are many. No wonder that most of the starter parks given to the ex-agitators to start a new life were sold to business entrepreneurs at ridiculously low prices.

Corroborating this position, Dabby (2021), observed that the ex-agitators are not helping matters. Apart from the ones that went for education training programmes, majority of the apprenticeship trainees in the areas of petty trading, artisans, welding, fabricating and many others sell-off their empowerment starter packs given to them worth millions of naira as give-away prizes to willing business men and women. According to him, "as an insider I can tell you that they are not prepared or patient enough to start and nurture businesses. Any starter pack given to them, they would sell. Only recently, more than 200 delegates were empowered with tricycles worth about Nine hundred and fifty thousand naira per tricycle, but they placed them on sale in their facebook walls for only three hundred and fifty thousand naira". He noted that if these set of beneficiaries were enterprising and willing to utilize opportunities given to them, they would have been economically stable and viable and add value to their families and society.

Another issue that seemingly militate against the success of the amnesty programme is the attitude of some Niger Delta elders. According to Tariomo, Chairman of phase one amnesty group in Yenagoa, some prominent elders, commanders and 'generals' from the region have been compromised and they

cannot speak out. Most of the elders from the Niger Delta who are supposed to speak out are wining and dining with the leadership of the programme, vying for fat contracts. Similarly, big time militant commanders like Ateke Tom, Tompoplo and "Shoot-at-sight" are alleged to have become close friends to the managers of the programme and the National Security Adviser and have turned blind eyes to their excesses and can no longer speak out. Worse still, the leadership of the Ijaw National Congress and the Ijaw Youth Council appears to have become willing tools in the hands of the managers of the programme.

Commenting on the challenge of the Amnesty programme, Timipre Sylva (2021), observed that "the programme was not managed as conceptualized. The whole idea was not to keep the programme in perpetuity but to wind-off, to give skills to some people and give those jobs. Unfortunately however, the programme has existed for over a decade with several billions of tax-payers money spent and yet there are no good skills training institutions/centres built in Nigeria".

The Perspectives

In order to make the amnesty programme operate effectively to engineer the desired impact, it is expedient that the followings be put in their right context:

The coordinators of the programme should and ought to be appointed from one of the core-Niger Delta states, preferably Bayelsa state or any other core Niger Delta State where all the agitations started. They must be people with vast knowledge, experience and competence that are capable of proffering solutions rather than being part of the problem themselves. The role-call of cronies and protégés loyal to the National Security Adviser appointed as coordinators of the programme are widely seen as a cog in the wheel of progress. Politicizing the appointments helps to breed incompetence, favoritism, nepotism, arrogance and a culture of impunity. And because those usually appointed to run the programme do not know anything about the 31 thousand delegates, they make their inquiries about the region from the elders. This is an aberration.

The head office of the Amnesty office is presently in Abuja, the nation's capital. It ought to be located in one of the core-Niger Delta states in similar way the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) and the Nigeria Content Development

and Management Board (NCDMB) head offices are located. This will make the managers of the program operate with some degree of caution. It may checkmate to a reasonable extent cases of diversion of project funds as it is alleged. A forensic audit of the activities of the programme Cordinators from inception to date may help identify loopholes and correct the abuses and instill fear in the managers of the programme. This will to a large extent check the financial recklessness that is widely believed to be in practice today.

There is the issue of lopsided employments in the amnesty office. According to Dabby, sensitive offices such as the Accounts and data capturing departments and many others are headed by non-southerners. He asked rhetorically, "what has a northerner got to do with the Niger Delta Amnesty programme? We see daily an array of girl friends of highly placed Nigerians mostly from the northern part of the country running away with juicy contracts and smiling to the backs".

Structurally, the three components of the programme (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) defies a holistic approach in solving the problems of the region. The agitations and struggle in the region goes beyond granting amnesty to insurgent groups, though hailed by few as laudable and a step in the right direction. The offer of amnesty appears to be merely a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Davidheiser and Nyiayaana (2011) hold the view that there was no substantial planning and political engagement before the amnesty was effected and therefore, it thus appear that it was a half-hearted measure. They further contended that the gift of amnesty to the militants in the case of the Niger Delta appear not to be in total agreement with the widely shared grievances of the local population to address the structural problems upon which militancy grew. It is a win/lose approach to insurgency in the region and apparently suggesting that a third party intervention is required to bring about a fresh, more consensual and promising peace process.

The Amnesty programme runs on consultants and contractors involving Niger delta elites/leaders and some highly placed top government officials. Before the declaration of amnesty, ideally there should have been wide engagement and consultation with the militants in a transparent manner that would have given them a sense of inclusion and this has become a very serious issue of concern. The

foot-soldiers felt cheated and sidelined and has always accused the hierarchy of both the government and their commanders of connivance, cheating, sidelining and enriching themselves. The programme thus appear to have become a conduit pipe through which public funds are siphoned. Ideally the Ijaw National Congress, the Ijaw Youth Council and the elders in the Niger Delta ought to stand up and speak out in defence of the region, but seemingly the quest for contracts and 'settlements' have become a way of survival and has quieten them. The leadership of these bodies appear to be struggling for themselves on how much comes into their pocket.

Commenting on the problems with amnesty and the failure of its impact on majority of the ex-agitators, Toriomo remarked "A time bomb is set and may explode at any time" He further claimed that the frequent blocking of the 'Mbiama' axis of the East-West High way in South-south Nigeria is due to poor management of their welfare.

In all, the issues Amnesty was designed to address have only minimally impacted positively on the region, rather the federal government benefits greatly from it because the region has become calmer for maximum oil exploitation and the central government appears to be satisfied with that as there are no real and genuine programmes put in place to addresss the fundamental and damning problems of the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

From the issues arising in the implementation and management of the Presidential Amnesty Programme in the Niger Delta, it thus appear that the programme has succeeded more on the side of the Federal government because the cease-fire has provided an enabling environment for the continuous exploitation of the oil resource than the beneficiaries and majority of the population of the Niger Delta people. While the problems of the region from which agitations in the region continue to fester and there is no permanent solution in sight, the conspiracy theory that funds meant for the amnesty programme are being siphoned through consultancy services and feeding of fictitious names into its data base appears to hold sway. The administrative hierarchy, acting in consonance with some prominent elders from the Niger Delta and some super ex-militant commanders

continue to feed fat from the programme. Corruption, administrative ineptitude, greed, nepotism connivance and lack of entrepreneurial zeal on the part of most of the ex-agitators (beneficiaries) are identified as some of the issues militating against the success of the programme. As it is now, majority of the ex-delegates are left in hopelessly despondent situations that are seemingly calling for remobilization to the creeks if urgent steps are not taken to, particularly checkmate the unwholesome practices of the mangers of the programme. As one of my source rightly stated, a time bomb is set and may explode at any time and where this happens, the consequences are better imagined than discussed.

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