

## The Olusegun Obasanjo Administration and the Niger Delta Question, 1999-2007

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**ABSTRACT** This paper examines the response of the Olusegun Obasanjo's administration to the festering crisis in the oil bearing belt of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. This is done against the backdrop of the ray of hope that was embedded in body language, actions and inactions of the Obasanjo administration as the birth of democracy in 1999 had raised fresh hopes for the effective and democratic resolution of the issues in contention in the oil bearing enclave. The study made use of primary and secondary sources of literature relevant to the issues in contention. The findings of the study showed that the intervention efforts of the regime were not far reaching enough. More importantly perhaps, is the fact that the observable developmental initiatives of the administration were done without political commitment and sincerity. The study concluded that the lackadaisical attitude of the administration toward the development of the region must have contributed in part to the escalation of the Niger Delta crisis.

### INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta remains one of the critical fault lines of Nigerian politics. As the region that holds Nigeria's predominant oil reserves and therefore, the national wealth, it has assumed a new geopolitical importance in the context of world oil prices. In fairness to President Obasanjo, the Niger Delta problem featured prominently in his inaugural speech on May 29, 1999 but thereafter, it receded to the realm of what (Hank Eso 2007), called bureaucratic foggy. When he took the oath of office in May 1999, president Obasanjo was quite cognizant of the festering crisis in the Niger Delta region. This is attested to in his speech when he promised to forward a bill within weeks of the inception of the administration to the national assembly, for a law providing for 13 per cent derivation to be paid to the oil producing states of the Niger Delta to be used for ecological rehabilitation, infrastructural and other development.

The birth of democracy in 1999 had raised hopes for the effective resolution of the Niger Delta imbroglio. Such hopes as noted by Omotola (2006), are not misplaced given the fact democracy is generally considered to be nationally imbued with conflict management devices such as freedom of expression by the people and political space for democratic dissensions, deliberations and consensus. Added to this was the fact that President Obasanjo, as part of his electioneering campaigns, had promised to fully engage the Niger Delta problem during his visit to the area in

1999. Obasanjo's presidential victory in 1999, in the wake of the darkest period of military rule in Nigeria's post independence history, held much promise. An internationally recognized statesman and diplomat imprisoned during the brutal Sanni Abacha years, he inherited the mantle of a massively corrupt state apparatus, an economy in shambles, and a federation crippled by the longstanding ethnic enmity (Oronto et al. 2004).

In this paper, we set out to examine Olusegun Obasanjo administration's response to the festering crisis in the Niger Delta. In doing this, we are cognizant with the fact that before the inauguration of the regime, there had been concerted and latent effort at taming the Niger Delta *monster*. As a background to the study, we discussed earlier attempts at tackling the hydra headed problems of the Niger Delta. This is done against the backdrop of locating the Niger Delta within the context of its significance in the realm of oil and gas exploration and exploitation. The analysis of the intervention effort of the Obasanjo's administration is done against their adequacy or otherwise. From the evidence adduced from this study, it is plausible that the interventions were not far reaching enough and were done without political commitment and sincerity. This, as it were must have contributed in part to the escalation of the crisis in the region.

### THE NIGER DELTA AND THE OIL STORY

The Niger Delta region has a population of 27

million, covering an area of 70,000 square kilometers, with 5000 communities, 50 ethnic groups and 250 dialects. The region is not only rich in oil and gas but in other natural resources like timber and wild life. The significant feature of the Niger Delta is the general state of under-development, not only by world standard but also in relation to many parts of the country. Most of the oil and gas production that has earned Nigeria above US\$500 billion in the past well over four decades have been produced and exploited in the Niger Delta. Currently, Nigeria is the eight largest oil-exporting country in the world with oil revenue accounting for about 80 percent of total government revenue, 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 40 percent contribution to Gross Domestic Product and about 4 percent of employment. Nigeria's proven reserve are estimated to be 36 billion barrels, while the country's natural gas reserves are even bigger, estimated at well over 100 trillion cubic feet (Tell, February 18, 2008:33; Usman, 2007). What to note is that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is the goose that lays the golden egg as oil exploitation is concentrated in the region.

So much wealth is derived from the bowels of the region yet, the scourge of poverty in the region is grim with people lacking basic human needs and the environment willfully and constantly degraded by oil companies (Dafinone 2008). When the World Bank carried out a comprehensive study of the region in 1995, it arrived at the following conclusions: The Niger Delta is the least developed area of Nigeria. Per capita income was less than \$280 per annum, with a high-rising population. Indices of development such as education, health, sanitation, job creation, water and other physical infrastructures, were far below acceptable standards. Environmental resources were gradually being degraded, and there was an extremely poor human capacity and basic skills. In the same vein, the 2006 Niger Delta Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), noted that 'the Niger Delta is a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructures and service, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth, squalor, and endemic conflicts' (UNDP 2006). This contrasts sharply with Qatar, a country of one million people that has the highest per capital income in the world, put at \$80,000 (Tell, July 14, 2008:30). By the 1990s, these long years of neglect and

deprivation, as well as failures of addressing the development challenges prevalent in the region, had created a volatile atmosphere where youths disrupted oil production activities at will and communities frequently engaged, with little provocation, in destructive inter and intra-community strife (Alaibe 2007: b4; Aghalino 2008).

#### **THE DENOUEMENT OF THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS BEFORE THE OBASANJO ADMINISTRATION**

The problem of the Niger Delta and its peculiar terrain engaged the attention of the colonial state. This as it were necessitated the setting up of the Sir Henry Willink's Commission to recommend the best strategies for the development of a region that boasts of, perhaps, the most difficult terrain in Africa. When it turned in its report in 1958, it recommended that the Niger delta deserved special attention and should be made a special area for development. Based on the Commission's report, the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Board, (NDDDB) in 1960 to cater for the unique developmental needs of the area (Ikporukpo 1981:119-129; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2006: Making a Difference... NDDC).

The Niger Delta Development Board was at best moribund and did not achieve the lofty objectives for which it was established (Aghalino 2004: 119-120; Daily Independent, Friday, December 14, 2007: B4). It was probably the failure of the NDDDB that facilitated the establishment of the Niger Delta River Basin Authority, along with other Basin Authorities through decree No.37 of 1976. While the terms of reference of the Basin Authorities were unequivocal, they failed to incorporate the provision of infrastructures and restitution of derelict land in the Niger Delta (Aghalino 2000: 11-19; Aghalino 2004). Besides the Authority was starved of funds as budgetary allocations were either too meager or were slow in coming. Indeed, the little funds in the coffers of the Authority were grossly mismanaged (Egborge 1998: 5).

It was because of the clear manifestation of potential threat to national security by anti-oil protest that some serious attention was paid to the Niger Delta question. In 1996, the 1.5 per cent fund was put in place under the allocation of revenue (federation accounts). To disburse this fund a committee was set up (Oil Mineral

Producing Areas Development Fund Committee). The Committee could not do much because its activities were halted by a Supreme Court judgment (OMPADEC Quarterly Report, Vol. 1, No., 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1993.) More importantly, the money set aside for the committee was forwarded to the State capitals and never got to the affected oil producing communities.

What seems to be the boldest attempt at tackling the Niger Delta crisis was the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). The OMPADEC was established through decree No. 23 of 19th July 1992 (OMPADEC Decree No. 23, 1992). This decree raised the limit of the derivation fund to 3 percent of the federation account. Section 11 of the decree which set out its objectives empowered the Commission among other things to; receive and administer the monthly sums from the allocation of the federation account in accordance with confirmed ratio of oil production in each state for the rehabilitation and development of oil mineral producing areas; for the tackling of ecological problems that have arisen from the exploration of oil minerals.

The administrative structure of the Commission showed a radical departure from earlier boards. This was possibly to stem the feeling of 'alienation and to involve the people in deciding what projects were necessary for them' (Akinyele 1998:84). This was perhaps also due to the need to avoid a top down approach of earlier boards which resulted in poor performance. By 1993, barely a year after its inauguration, OMPADEC published the list of 78 projects embarked upon as part of phase one of its activities. The list included; 63 projects in Rivers state, 13 for Delta, and 1 each for Akwa Ibom and Abia states. By 1996, the list had risen to 1,182 projects, covering a wide range of activities such as provision of pipe borne water, roads, electrification and hospitals.

It was reported that the Commission received a total sum of N11.5 billion between 1992 and 1996 when its operation was suspended. This means that the Commission received a yearly average of N3 billion or N250 million per month (The Guardian, Lagos, 22 January, 1997; The Vanguard, Lagos, 25 June 1996). On face value, it would appear that the development on ground contrast with the amount of money released for the Commission. Be that as it may, we must quickly add that the performance of OMPADEC

is a subject of heated debate (Aghalino 2004). It would appear that those who benefited from Commission lauded its activities, while communities that failed to realize anything substantial from it poured a lot of vituperation on it. One area that drew the ire of some critics was the way contracts were indiscriminately awarded (Oral interview: Mr. Enudo J. Ozoro, 22/12/1998). It was alleged that contracts awarded by the Commission failed to satisfy the conditions laid down by government. The high level of corruption in the Commission probably explains why it was so insolvent that, at a time, it was indebted to the tune of N2.3 billion.

In the face of copious corruption and mismanagement of funds, the federal government instituted an investigation into its activities in 1996. The sordid findings culminated in the sacking of the Chairman of OMPADEC, A.K. Horsefall, in December 1996. The appointment of Eric Opia to replace Horsefall failed to assuage matters. Rather Opia's penchant for looting public fund surpassed that of Horsefall (Aghalino 2001). Consequently, Opia was again sacked in 1998, when he could not account for the sum of N6.7 billion that accrued to the Commission. In due course, OMPADEC was restructured under the Chairmanship of Vice-Admiral Preston Omatsola before its activities were liquidated.

On the political front, it seems the federal government has conceded much to the people of the Niger Delta. As a plausible conciliatory offer to the Ijaw ethnic nationality, Bayelsa State was created out of the then Rivers State. This concession was also extended to the Isoko, Kwale, and the Itsekiri when their yearning for a separate state crystallized in 1991 with the creation of Delta State from the then Bendel State. The point to note is that ideally, states were created to facilitate grassroots development as well as to eliminate majority domination (Danmole and Aghalino 1995: 16-23). But experience in the Niger Delta has shown that the creation of States and Local governments has led to the distortion of the fragile peace in the region. This is blamed on the fact that there is always incessant agitation on location and relocation of States and Local Government headquarters as well as the ethnic configuration of such states and local governments. This situation more often than not led to fratricidal crisis in the region as epitomized by the Ijaw/Itsekiri crisis and the Urhobo/Itsekiri impasse (Human Rights Watch 1999: 120).

The failure of these efforts worsened the people's conditions, leading to frustrated expectations. This slowly gave rise to tension, anger and conflicts and by 1999 the region was awash with thousands of abandoned projects, relics of the people's expectations. The people had developed a strong distrust of government intentions and the people of the region started taking their destinies into their own hands (Arnold 2000). This situation has engendered what Ikelegbe referred to as an emerging economy of conflict in the Niger Delta which is characterized with intense, violent and bloody struggle for the appropriation of oil resources and benefits from the oil economy and a thriving market of illegal trading and smuggling of arms, crude and refined oil. There are various estimates of the quantity of theft of crude oil stolen by or with the aid of armed gangs and militias. The Nigerian Economic Summit Group estimates that a daily theft of about 100,000 barrels of oil valued at about US\$2.8 million (Ikelegbe 2005: 209; Subair, and Adesanmi 2003). This pathetic situation which is akin to terrorist threat and or an emerging Colombia drew the attention of Obasanjo as he attempted to tackle the festering crisis head on (Oronto et al. 2004)

#### **THE OBASANJO ADMINISTRATION AND THE NIGER DELTA IMBROGLIO**

By 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo assumed office as the president of Nigeria, the Niger Delta was practically on the boil. The people were not happy. Values and infrastructures had deteriorated; the people had become restive and desired immediate intervention in their lives and the life of the region. The rate of poverty was scary. The people of the region had little or nothing to show for playing host to a multi-billion dollar a year industry. Worst still environmental remediation measures were limited and negligible. Farms, streams and the whole environment were constantly under the threat of pollution. All these led to the springing up of ethnic groups, formed largely by the Ijaw and Ogoni, championing confrontations with the Nigerian government and multinational oil companies. The youths of the Niger Delta decided to take their destiny in their own hands (Olukorede 2007). The gory yet gloomy picture painted above was what confronted Olusegun Obasanjo when he assumed power. Definitely, this nightmare could not be wished away.

Thus, when the Olusegun Obasanjo administration was inaugurated, one of its major actions was to see how to alleviate the crisis in the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta. In 2000, the President implemented the 13 percent derivation as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. In what seemed to be a major frontal attack on the festering Niger Delta problem, the federal government under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo initiated a bill to the National Assembly on the development of the Niger Delta. The National Assembly in accordance with section 58 (a) and 5 of the 1999 Constitution subsequently passed the bill establishing the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), after the president refused to assent to the bill. As it were, there was disagreement between the Presidency and the National Assembly on the funding of the Commission. The National Assembly claimed to have acted in the national interest by overriding the president in passing the bill.

The remit of the Commission is to accelerate economic development and provide the much needed social infrastructures in the area (CDD. Org/resources/workingpapers/niger\_delta\_eng.htm). Indeed, the NDDC is charged with a clear mission: 'to facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful' (NDDC Act 2000). Possibly to guard against the weakness of the OMPADEC, the NDDC Act provides for special bodies to supervise the activities of the Commission in order to avoid waste and corruption.

These bodies include the management committee made up of eight directors, a managing director, and a governing council, to give general direction to the management committee, an advisory committee made up of governors of member states of the Commission, to advise and monitor its activities (See NDDC Act especially section 2,3,4,9,11 and 19). The Commission is to be at the forefront of facilitating interaction among all development stakeholders and identifying priorities and approaches for Niger Delta development. Its responsibility for the sustainable development of the area confers on it, the onerous task of mobilizing resources, effort and initiatives to ensure effective coordination, and coherence.

Implicitly, the NDDC also has monitoring functions to ensure that regulations and policies

are observed and, it is its task to ensure that the process involved in its function is participatory and inclusive. Since inception the NDDC has embarked on systematic efforts to put in place enduring institutions and operational mechanisms which will consolidate its take-off, in order to prevent the mistakes of the past. A pointer to the failure of the NDDC could be seen in the caustic remark about the Niger Delta in 2006 Human Development Report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) when it noted that “the Niger Delta is a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and service, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth, squalor, and endemic conflict” (UNDP 2006)

The Olusegun Obasanjo’s government also responded to the quest for resource control in oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta in a number of ways. These include attempting to whittle down the agitation through constitutional arrangement. For example, to appear responsive to the yearning of the people in the Niger Delta, the Federal Government played safe and struck a compromise in the constitution. This was done by virtue of section 162(2) of the 1999 constitution, which gives back 13 percent of the monies generated from all resources to the various state governments in the oil producing areas. The reason for this concession derives not out of sympathy for the people in the Niger Delta, but possibly because of the ferociousness with which the youths in the Niger Delta were advancing their course.

The federal Government has also responded to the crisis by way of blackmail, and by churning out misleading information to the public on the issues in contention. For example, the Authorities in Abuja portray the agitation and restiveness in the Niger Delta as synonymous to secessionist movement and that it is a threat to the corporate existence of Nigeria. Furthermore, legislators of the Niger Delta extraction are said to have been approached and advised to drop the issue of resource control if they want to be re-nominated for political offices they hold currently. While this claim is difficult to substantiate, suffice it to say that the *volte* face of some legislators from the Niger Delta on the issue would seem to support this contention.

Remarkably, the onshore – offshore dichotomy imbroglio – a fall out from the resource control debate, remains to date an acrimonious subject. This possibly explains why the federal

government elected to use the legal approach as a response to the quest for resource control. As it were, the Attorney – general and Minister for justice of the federation, Bola Ige filed a suit against the States on 6th February, 2001 for a determination of the seaward boundary of a littoral state within the federal republic for the purpose of calculating the amount accruing to the federation accounts directly from the state pursuant to the provision of Section 162 (2) of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. As it should be expected, the states at the forefront of the agitation for state control of resources responded adequately by marshalling out their argument. In spite of the optimism of the state Governors, the Federal Government won the case. In their judgment, the judges opined that “the seaward boundary of a littoral state within the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the purpose of calculating the amount of revenue accruing to the federation account directly from any natural resources derived from that state pursuant to section 162(2) is the low-watermark of the land surface thereof (if in the case of areas as in the Cross River State with an archipelago of islands) the seaward limits of inland waters within the state (Dafinone 2001; Edewvie 2001).

The implication of this judgment is that the littoral states are no more entitled to revenue from offshore oil exploration. The Supreme Court judgment was not totally a zero-sum one. Before the judgment, natural gas was excluded from the derivation principle – an action that has now been deemed unconstitutional. It is relevant to add that the judgment of the Federal Government control of offshore oil and gas revenue without any compromise and negotiation can only heat up the polity and further complicate matters. Ordinarily, it is expected that the devolution of power to the state inform of the control of their resources could facilitate ultimate deepening of democratic culture.

Possibly having regard to the impact of the Supreme Court judgment on some of the littoral states, especially those without onshore oil wells, and increase in tension in the region, a Committee headed by Chief Tony Anenih was set up to find a ‘political solution’ to the lingering issue (Aghalino 2006). The Committee recommended a legislative intervention through the enactment of another law that would explicitly state that natural resources found offshore will be deemed to be found within the territory of the adjoining littoral



state for the purpose of the application of the derivation principle. The Committee's report must have prompted Obasanjo to send a bill to the National Assembly. In the new bill however, the President inserted a time bomb by including an ambiguous term- contiguous zone, which meant that the derivation principle would apply only to revenue from natural resources found in the contiguous zone of a state. But the National Assembly rose to the occasion by replacing contiguous zone with continental shelf and exclusive economic zone. This caused a stalemate as the President refused to assent to the bill. Having an eye on the forthcoming 2003 elections, President Obasanjo reached a compromise with the National Assembly by substituting '200 metres water depth isobaths' in place of contiguous zone and re-submitted the bill to the National Assembly. The people of the Niger Delta had their reservation about the 200 meters depth isobaths, but the national assembly consented to the compromise (Ojameruaye 2006).

The Obasanjo administration in some rare instances waved the olive branch to the agitators in the Niger Delta. This was done by putting in place a number of committees to keep the peace in the region. These include: constitution of the Major General Ogomudia Security Committee on the Oil Producing Areas; constitution of the Governor James Ibori Presidential Committee on the Niger Delta, 2004; constitution of the Major General Muhammed Abdullahi led Presidential Committee on Peace and Reconciliation in the Niger Delta with a special sub-committee to resolve the conflict in Rivers State; and the Niger Delta Peace and Security Strategy allegedly inspired by oil firms in the region (Ebiri 2006). It is difficult to assess the achievements of the plethora of committees aimed at tackling the restiveness in the region. What perhaps is not in doubt is that intentions by government are not in short supply. The multiple knee-jerk responses and proliferation of committees is a pointer to the fact that the government is yet to get its bearing right in taming the crisis in the region. Nevertheless, it may not be out of place to posit that the fire-brigade responses of the government so far to the issues in contention in the region is a manifestation of the little premium place on the region despite its economic importance to Nigeria (Aghalino 2008)

To ensure the sustainable empowerment of the people, the Calabar Export Processing Zone

and the Onne oil and gas zone were established. This was possibly done by the government in anticipation of their multiplier effects in terms of employment generation and capacity building of local industries. To encourage indigenous participation, marginal oil fields were farmed out to state governments in the Niger Delta (Academic Associate Peace Work and Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation 2004: 37). The point was made earlier that the oil wealth of the Niger Delta would seem to be antithetical to the aspirations of the people. For one, it is more or less a curse. Again, any attempt to endanger the flow of it has always been met with brute force. Consequently, to the Federal Government, the advocates of resource control are viewed with suspicion and hatred – unnecessary distraction that must be crushed. Indeed, without any convincing evidence, the call for the resource control is seen as a call to break up Nigeria as it smacks of separatist tendency.

There has been a quantum leap in the national resources being devoted to the Niger Delta region. Recent distribution of revenue allocation to the state governments is most revealing. Based on derivation alone, in 2005, Bayelsa state received N6.4 billion, Rivers, N8 billion, Delta state, N15 billion, Akwa Ibom, N4.6 billion. However, the issue seem not to be how much as it is how much of a trickle down there is to the grassroots and its impact on the local communities in these states (Hank, <http://www.kwenu.com/index.html>) It needs to be acknowledged that while the government has taken some remedial measures, including new revenue sharing criteria based strictly on derivation, the government is still flunking the litmus test of tackling the restiveness in the Niger Delta.

The Obasanjo administration also tried to combat the Niger Delta crisis through the National Political Reforms Conference in early 2005. Some proponents of resource control decided to take the opportunity of the conference to address the issue. After a bitter and divisive debate, the conference ended on July 11, 2005. Among other things, the conference made the following recommendation on the Niger Delta issue: an increase in the level of derivation from the present 13 per cent to 50 per cent. Cognizant of the need for national unity, peace and stability, they agreed to accept in the interim, 25 per cent derivation with a gradual increase to attain the 50 per cent over a period of five years. When it became clear

that the president was not in a hurry to implement the recommendation, the militants resumed and intensified their attacks on oil installations and outright kidnapping of oil workers (ThisDay, Thursday, 4 April, 2002). The militants raised the ante of their agitation possibly because of the arrest and detention of Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, the leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteers Force (NDPVF) and the impeachment of Dipriye Solomon Peter Alamiyesegeha, the governor of Bayelsa state in early 2005.

The Obasanjo administration also initiated the Council for the Social Economic Development of the Niger Delta. The Council, which was likened to the United States of America's post World War 11 Marshall Plan for Europe entails several far reaching measures and is reportedly valued at over N20 trillion, most of which will come from the oil industry (This Day, Lagos, 18 April 2006; International Crisis Group, 2006). The programme, it is envisaged, will also create some 20, 000 new jobs for the locals. Another facet of the plan is the pledge by President Obasanjo to flag off the N230 billion (\$1.75 billion) highway- the long abandoned East-West road; the dredging of the River Niger; upgrading of the Petroleum Training Institute, (PTI), Effurun, Warri to a degree-awarding institution; establishment of a Federal Polytechnic in Bayelsa State by September 2006: rural electrification of 396 communities; water supply for over 600 communities, and appointment of an officer in the office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation to coordinate the various intervention programmes by all tiers of government and those of the oil companies and development partners.

The idea of converting the Petroleum Training Institute to a Federal University generated a lot of controversy as people of the region failed to see the utility of the conversion when in reality they are clamouring for more federal presence in the region. Due to vociferous opposition to the scheme, the Obasanjo administration jettisoned the idea and established full-fledged Federal University of Petroleum resources which have taken off at the PTI premises. The nuts and bolts of the Council initiative span nine core areas. It calls for addressing employment generation, transport, education, health, telecom, environment, agriculture, power and water resources. Of these, the employment component is the most critical and strategic since it puts money directly into the hands of the people. The plan also

initiated a process by which the Nigerian military will absorb some 500 men and women from the region, up to the mandated 1,000 persons as from May 2006. Though not spelt out, it seems the spread is aimed at absorbing elements from the cadre of the various ethnic militias

In the light of the widespread concerns and acknowledgement that addressing youth's unemployment would be vital given it's trickled down income generation capacity, the decision to immediately lift the embargo on police recruitment, thus facilitating the intake of 10,000 new recruits, is a salient one. The creation of 1000 new positions by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and recruitment of 7,300 National Certificate of Education (NCE) and University graduate teachers by the end of 2006, will go a long way in lifting the present unemployment pressure. The process by which the government arrived at the new policy remains suspect for now. It is noteworthy that the leading militia group in the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), has rejected the initiative, thus leading one to suspect that the government took a quick approach without adequate consultation of all stakeholders concerned. Requiring serving State Governors to nominate the members seems senseless, given that it would be used as a patronage system (Hank 2007 ). It took almost seven years before President Obasanjo launched the promised "Comprehensive Development for the Niger Delta". When he launched the plan on March 27 2007, two months to the end of his 8 - years rule,"because of its timing or its doubtful motive, or both, the Niger Delta Regional Master Plan recently launched by the outgoing President Olusegun Obasanjo did not attract the expected enthusiasm both from its target beneficiaries and their compatriots in other parts of the country" (ThisDay, Lagos, April 16, 2007). It would appear that, increasingly, it became clear that Obasanjo administration in its untidy succession plan could not but include the South- South in its calculations if he was to bequeath a Nigeria that would be minimally governable (Amuta 2008: 56). This must have influenced the choice of His Excellency, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan , the then governor of Bayelsa state, an Ijaw as the vice presidential running mate of Umar Yar' Adua in the ticket of the People's Democratic Party during the 2007 elections.

The evidence available suggests that the

Federal Government does not favor dialogue in this matter although government agents feign preference for dialogue and peaceful resolution of the impasse. It is worth reiterating that the stick approach of the government to the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis has merely escalated the issue. It is expected that the Federal Government should follow due process in bringing truculent youths to book. Rather, the government more often than not sends in troops to 'pacify' the youths – a strategy that has never paid off. Apart from the fact that this is a continuation of *Pax Britannica* in the area, it is meant to harass and intimidate the people to submission by possibly wiping out communities as epitomized by the Odi massacre. In December 1998, the Federal Government massacred youths in Yenagoa for demanding a measure of control of oil resources (International Crisis Group 2006). As if this few display of state terror were not enough, a few months earlier, the government unleashed a reign of terror on Kaiama where weeks before, youths have issued the Kaiama Declaration demanding for resource control. While it may be cynical, for oil, Nigerian government is prepared to submerge the Niger Delta in blood. In a way, it may be fair to stress that the shedding of blood has been part of Nigerian government's domestic policy toward the Niger Delta.

It will be recalled in late 1999, several young men described as hoodlums by community leaders in Odi, Bayelsa State, kidnapped and killed several police men in alleged retaliation for the earlier death of Ijaws at the hands of Yoruba militants in Lagos. They then took refuge in Odi. After a government deadline to hand over the killers lapsed, the security forces responded brutally (International Crisis Group 2006). The invasion of Odi was ostensibly to teach a 'lesson' to the residents of the town, and serve as a warning to other militant communities in the area. In that expedition, more than 2000 people were killed, many more injured and unquantifiable resources destroyed. Senator Chuba Okadigbo, the then President of the Senate, visited the scene a week after the massacre and stated: 'the facts speak for themselves...there is no need for speech because there is nobody to speak to' (Quoted in Rowell 2005: 4).

The destruction of Odi by the Nigerian government, elected only in May 1999, is not only symptomatic of the crisis that has gripped the country's oil rich Niger Delta since the late

eighties, it also a clear indication that the brutality and heavy handedness with which previous regimes dealt with legitimate political dissention is still very much a feature of governance in the crisis-ridden nation (CDD.Org/resources/workingpapers/niger\_delta\_eng.htm).

A later example of government's heavy handed approach came on 19th February, 2005, when troops attacked the town of Odioma, in Bayelsa State. The military said it had come under fire from militants in the village. At least seventeen people were killed, including a two year old child and an elderly woman, both burnt to death (Amnesty International, 2005). The response of Nigerian state to crisis in the region should not surprise keen watchers of the Nigerian economy. The point was made earlier that there is a convergence of interest in the politics of the control of oil resources and the survival of Nigeria because of the mono-cultural nature of the economy. Thus, according to Ikelegbe, "given the very high stakes of oil, it constricts the state to be sluggish on dialogue negotiation and concession, and expansive in terms of the repressive response" (Ikelegbe 2001; Ikelegbe 2005 ). What to add is that, repression and intimidation within a system bears inherent seeds of self-destruction and possibly enhancing the festering of the mustered seeds of discontent. If any thing at all, right from the pre-colonial period, repression has never weakened the spirits of the people of the Niger-Delta for the ultimate control of their resources.

A manifest consequence of the violent response of the state security agencies to the crisis in the region is the militarization of the region. The Navy has guarded oil installations and escorted oil shipment since the 1990s. The Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope has well over 4000 military personnel deployed to the Niger Delta (Ikelegbe 2005: 223). There have been crack down on the militia, piracy, oil bunkerers and illegal arms in the region. This has involved as stated earlier massive military operations, combing the creeks and condoning off and searching riverine communities that house pirates and militants (Omonibi 2004; Lawal 2004).

While repression has been a convenient approach of the Obasanjo administration, from time to time it toyed with the idea of co-operation and payment of money to selected communities leaders'. The essence of this was to create a crack



in the rank of the people. This situation played itself out on the Ogoni issue when those termed vultures and local collaborators were subjects of ribald songs and infamy -a situation, which culminated in the escalation of the Ogoni tragedy (Naanen 1995; Osagae 1995: Committee for the Defence of Human Rights 1998; Azaiki 2003). The whole essence of paying gratification to targeted members of truculent communities was for them to act in ways that were clearly against the interests of their own people. Some other crude response of the government includes tacit support of one ethnic group against others. This is done by preferential treatment of some communities in the provision of social amenities as well as location and relocation of local Governments headquarters. The Ijaw/Itsekiri example is succinct enough (Human Rights Watch 1999). While the details of this approach should not delay us here, suffice it to say that, the whole essence of this is to divert the peoples' attention from the exploitative tendency of government.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have made attempt to examine the response of the Olusegun Obasanjo administration to the festering crisis in the oil bearing belt of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. This is done against the backdrop of the ray of hope that was embedded in body language, actions and inactions of the Obasanjo administration as the birth of democracy in 1999 had raised fresh hopes for the effective and democratic resolution of the issues in contention in the oil bearing enclave. It is found that the intervention efforts of the regime were not far reaching enough. The tendency of the administration to use force to intimate genuine agitators for environmental conservation and development of the region fuelled the crisis. More importantly perhaps, is the fact that the observable developmental initiatives of the administration were done without political commitment and sincerity. In the light of the above, it is suggested that the nation should return to true democracy and more decentralized form of federalism as this would give room for the states in the oil-bearing belt to adequately channel their resources for the development of the region. There is a compelling need for the oil firms in the region to change their business ethos of putting profit before the people and also abide by

international standards and best oil field practices. Finally, if the enormous responsibilities of the Niger Delta Development Commission must be actualized, the Federal Government must release all outstanding funds due to the Commission since 2001.

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