

# SOPHIA

AN AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS  
VOLUME 9, NO. 2, APRIL, 2007



## NIGER DELTA CRISES AND THE GANDHI PHILOSOPHY OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By

Lanre Olaolu Amodu

### Abstract

*The Niger Delta occupies a very significant position in the economy of Nigeria. This fact cannot be overemphasized since about 90% of the country's revenue is generated from oil, and oil is got mainly from the area. This therefore makes it obvious that the crisis in the Niger Delta directly affects the whole of the country. In a bid to ensure the development of the area, which actually is underdeveloped, and to acquire the right to manage their own resources, there have emerged several militant groups in the Niger Delta. One of the major methods adopted by the militants to achieve their purpose is however the use of violence. There have been several incidences of vandalization, kidnaps, and other acts of violence, thereby making the international community to reckon the area as one of the most volatile areas in the world. Since it has been observed that the violence used by the militants is not resolving the crisis, this paper suggests the adoption of non-violent action as proposed by Mahatma Gandhi.*

### Introduction

The Niger Delta is a densely populated area in Nigeria. Its boundaries, as defined by the Nigeria government, extend over about 70,000 km, and it makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. It is the area that stretches in an East-West direction and it extends from South West Cameroon to the Okitipupa ridge, forming an apex at the South East of the Rivers Niger and Benue confluence (Asakitikpi and Oyelaran, 1999). This area consists of Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Edo States.

The communities in the Niger Delta have settled in the area for several millennia. In fact, the oldest group is said to have been in the region for some 7,000 to 10,000 years. According to Atakiti (2004), as cited in Saiyou (2006), the Niger Delta consists of mostly agrarian communities before the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Those communities produced commodities such as oil palm, rubber, sugarcane, and fruit trees like mango, banana, plantain, and pawpaw. They also engaged in fishing, handicraft, and trading.

In 1956, crude oil was discovered in commercial quantity at Oloibiri in the Niger Delta though it didn't assume a significant position in Nigeria's economic index until the post-Colonial period. Consequent to the discovery and exploration of oil, the Niger Delta was projected to the fore of Nigeria's economy. According to Alao (2005), a decade after crude oil was first discovered in the Niger Delta, Nigeria was exporting about 139, 548, 969 barrels per annum and this yielded over £91, 942, 000. In the January 2006 research report of the Joint Economic Committee, Nigeria was featured on OPEC's chat as the country with the 10<sup>th</sup> largest known crude oil reserves in the world with 35.9 billion barrels. Nigeria is also the eight largest oil exporter in the world with 2.19 million barrels exported a day.

Nigeria's oil fortune is not without a price, however. Asakitikpi and Oyelaran, (1999), observed that tapping into the oil reserves requires the construction of rigs, industrial facilities, and power plants, and it also involves the process of prospecting, exploring and dwelling crude mineral oil. They stated that all these cumulate in the degradation and destruction of life-supporting ecological systems and natural resources. Apart from the destruction of the vegetation during the exploration and production, the flaring of associated gas in the process of extracting the crude oil poses a threat to human life. Unburned carbon is often transported into the homes and working areas of the Niger Delta inhabitants. Also, whenever it rains, thick sooths are washed off roofs and other surfaces causing the black-like water, which is believed to contain harmful chemicals, to affect the fertility of the land. According to Alao (2005), some gas flaring sites in the Niger Delta have been in existence for more than 30 years running 24 hours a day. Hence, about 35 million tons of carbon dioxide and 12 million tons of methane are released in a year.

Consequent to the degradation of the environment, the sources of livelihood of the Niger Delta people have been destroyed, thereby impoverishing them since an alternative have not been provided by the government or the oil industry. More ironic is the fact that the area which is responsible for Nigeria's oil wealth is one of the most backward in terms of development. Communities in the Niger Delta lack basic infrastructures such as good roads, pipe-borne water, hospitals, schools, electricity, etc (Alao, 2005). Hence, the prevalent socio-economic and political

problems in the area engender restiveness. Several militant groups have emerged perpetrating violence in the area, with a lot of them claiming to be representing the Niger Delta community.

In this paper, an attempt is made at a re-evaluation of the current approach adopted by the Niger Delta militant groups in their bid to address the prevalent problems in the area. This paper suggests the adoption of non-violent action as exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi, and it presents some outcome of the use of his philosophy in similar circumstances.

### **Violence in the Niger Delta**

The evident violence in the Niger Delta in Nigeria has been described by Onua as a sort of revenge mission on both the government and multinational oil companies. On one hand, the government is blamed for the neglect of the area while it uses the resources derived from there to develop other areas in the country; and on the other hand, the oil companies are accused of not doing enough to develop the communities from which they make their money. Since oil exploration processes engender degradation of the environment, the indigenes of the Niger Delta argue that they are entitled to compensation. Hence, there have emerged several militant groups who probably feel that by fighting for their rights, they can bring succour to their people.

In 1993, there was a campaign by the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) advocating a proper pricing of petroleum. The campaign enlightened that Nigeria may not have oil to export in the next 10 years (In Search of Succor, 1993). This further aggravated the already volatile condition in the Niger Delta as the communities intensified their demand for resource control. Their argument was that they were deprived even though Nigeria's oil wealth was got from their area, how much more when it dries up? In a bid to display their grievances therefore, the militant groups resorted to violent acts such as pipeline vandalization, acquiring and using arms, going on rampages, etc. Some of those violent acts have cost the loss of thousands of lives.

In 2002, an international observation team declared the Niger Delta as one of the most volatile regions in the world (Alao, 2005). The condition has gotten even more intense in recent times in the wake of kidnaps carried out by the militant groups either for ransom or for political purposes. Militants initially kidnapped expatriate oil worker to attract the attention of the international community to the neglect of the Niger Delta. Unfortunately, some of the militant groups have hijacked the genuine struggle by kidnapping expatriate oil workers for ransom (Dead Expatriate's Corpse, 2007).

In January 11, 2006, four foreign oil workers were kidnapped by one of the militant groups known as the Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The group demanded for \$ 1.5 billion from Shell to compensate the Ijaw communities for the pollution caused by the oil companies. It also demanded the release of the former Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief Diepriye Alameiyesigha, and Asari Dokubo. Nine more expatriates working for Shell Group at Koko village in Delta State were also kidnapped on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February, 2006.

About 200 expatriate oil workers have been kidnapped since 2006, and most of them have been released unharmed for ransom (Three-year-old Kidnapped, 2007). On the 14<sup>th</sup> of August however, an expatriate died when he was about to be released by the militants. The death was allegedly as a result of the abductee's ill health. He was kidnapped in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, and was moved to the creeks of Bayelsa State. According to police report, when the militants discovered that the expatriate was hypertensive, they made attempted to release him, but he died in the speed boat conveying him (Dead Expatriate's Corpse, 2007).

The violence in the Niger Delta further degenerates as the militants embark on indiscriminate kidnapping. This they did by making children the subject of their kidnap. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2007, a three-year-old daughter of a British expatriate was kidnapped by the militants, making her the third child to be kidnapped. The first child was the daughter of a Nigerian businessman, while the other was the daughter of a local state legislator. On July 12, 2007, the three-year-old son of a traditional ruler was also kidnapped. All of these children were released shortly after they were kidnapped at the payment of the stipulated ransom (Three-year-old Seized, 2007).

It is noteworthy at this juncture that the human right struggle in the Niger Delta has gradually migrated from a peaceful demand for resource control to indiscriminate acts of violence. It is also significant to note that the militant groups that claim to be representing the Niger Delta, and have collected several ransom are yet to use such to improve the area. The violence perpetrated has also become a bane to the legitimate struggle of the people to achieve justice since the international community they intend to attract does not condone acts of violence.

The kidnapping of indigenes is another dimension to the violence in the Niger Delta that leaves spectators confused as to the actual motive of the perpetrators. If we conclude that the expatriates are kidnapped because of their association with the multinational oil companies, how then do we explain the kidnap of Nigerians, and children at that? Here, the motive of the militants seem to

tend towards economic (ransom taking) than political (resource control). At a rally staged by about 500 Ijaw women to protest the Kidnap of the 70-year-old mother of the Speaker of Bayelsa State House of Assembly, the women expressed their shock at the turn of events. They also expressed their confusion as to the motive of the militants for the act since their demand from the government; the release of Chief Alamiyeseigha and Asari Dokubo, have just been released (500 Ijaw Women Protest, 2007).

It has become obvious therefore that rather than abate the resource control controversy in the Niger Delta, the violent acts have further aggravated it. Though the cause been pursued is legitimate, the method of its achievement is faulty. In light of this observation, this paper proposes a re-strategizing for the militant groups. If indeed their motive is to eventually see the Niger Delta developed, they must first perform the feat of restoring the confidence of their audience, both local and international, in the legitimacy of their struggle. After this, pressure can then be mounted on both the government and the oil companies to pay the appropriate attention to the Niger Delta. In a bid to achieve this undoubtedly colossal feat, this paper suggests the adoption of non-violent action.

### **The Gandhian Philosophy**

The Gandhian philosophy first made its appearance in South Africa, and later in India. According to Mahatma Gandhi, as cited in Bondurant (1988), the philosophy represents a movement that is aimed at replacing methods of violence by introducing non-violent ones that are based entirely on truth. This philosophy consists of three salient tenets and they are truth, non-violence, and self-suffering.

Gandhi incorporated truth as an essential element of his technique because he believed that truth is the greatest driving force of humanity; the quest for the truth is what keeps man going. According to Bondurant, Gandhi never claimed to know the truth in any absolute sense; he however repeatedly reminded others that man's inability to know the truth requires him to create and maintain an unceasingly open disposition towards those who would differ with him. This approach is particularly significant in conflict resolution because it allows the parties involved to view the subject of the conflict from one another's view point. Customarily, one of the major hindrances to effective conflict resolution is the act of entering into negotiations with preconceived notions of the motive of the other party, thereby maintaining a closed mind towards further inquiries. Gandhi advocated an unceasing pursuit and investigation into truth because after it has been found out, it becomes the potent weapon for further conquest. He also emphasized that pursuit of truth did not accommodate violence being inflicted on one's opponent; rather, such an opponent must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. This becomes pertinent because what one party perceives as truth may be perceived by the other party as error.

The non-violent notion of the Gandhian philosophy is captured by the Indian word "Ahimsa." Ahimsa means that one may not offend anybody or harbor uncharitable thoughts even towards someone who may consider himself to be one's enemy. This tenet is based on the deliberate refusal to harm. In the struggle for justice, it is of no little importance to conduct all activities in a harmless manner so as to win the confidence and support of one's audience. Gandhi emphasized that non-violence does not mean meek submission to the will of the evildoer; however, it implies opposing the tyrant with one's whole soul (Prabhu & Rao, 1996). He stated that non-violence is a more potent force against wickedness than retaliation whose very nature is to aggravate wickedness. Violence is better countered when the perpetrator's expectation of physical resistance is disappointed. According to Gandhi, "it is the acid test of non-violence that, in a non-violent conflict, there is no rancor left behind, and in the end, the enemies are converted into friends" (Prabhu & Rao, 1996, 327).

By self-suffering, Gandhi did not advocate surrender; rather, he advocated an ability to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest grade consequent in the loss of fear. He believed that as one learns the art of killing in the training for violence, one must also learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence. The essence of this tenet is the willingness of the individuals involved in the struggle to trade their physical comfort for the achievement of the objective of the campaign. Self-suffering also implies the use of suffering to illuminate the art of injustice being perpetrated on the people.

The Gandhian philosophy has provided a backdrop against which several human right campaigns have been undertaken. Among the prominent icons that have fought injustice by drawing inspiration from the philosophy are Martin Luther King Jr. and the Nigerian example, Ken Saro-Wiwa.

### **Martin Luther King Jr**

While studying at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, Martin Luther King Jr. heard a lecture on Mahatma Gandhi and the non-violent civil disobedience campaign he successfully used

to oppose British rule in India. King was particularly inspired by Gandhi's words that the pain of the people will make the perpetrators see their injustice. Hence, after reading several books on Gandhi, he traveled to India in 1959 to meet with Gandhi's followers. King later led a Black bus boycott in Montgomery where about 17,000 black people boycotted the bus services for 13 months. This they did to completely end the system of segregation in every aspect of public life. Consequent on the loss of revenue due to the boycott, and the decision of the Supreme Court, the Montgomery Bus Company was forced to accept integration (Sonza; 2003).

King's adherence to the non-violence philosophy remained the central tactic of his civil-right movement. His advocacy of non-violent means of achieving civil-right reforms won him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. King was so revered because of his ideals that his non-violent strategy was adopted by a small group of black students in Greensboro, North Carolina. The students embarked on a student sit-in at a local Woodworth's Store restaurant which had a policy of not serving black people. In the days that followed, more black students joined in until they occupied all the seats in the restaurant. The segregation was ended after six months of student sit-in.

### **Ken Saro-Wiwa**

Ken Saro-Wiwa, a playwright, poet, and an activist from Ogoni land, Rivers State, in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, championed a cause to defend the rights of the Niger Delta people, particularly the Ogonis. He was the leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MASOP), established with the sole aim of combating the perceived injustice in Ogoni land. The community had been devastated by the operations of the oil and gas industry. Saro-Wiwa led a campaign against multinational oil companies such as Anglo-Dutch Shell, Chevron, Texaco, Exxon and Agip, who he believed expropriated land, polluted land, water and air, and wrecked the agricultural economy of the people without putting anything back into the local economy (African Writers Abroad, 1995).

The hallmark of Saro-Wiwa's civil right campaigns was non-violent and peaceful action for which he referred to Gandhi for inspiration (African Writers Abroad, 1995). He produced a film featuring scenes of gas flaring burning incessantly in proximity to shacks and primitive schools whose metal roofs have been corroded with acid rain. The film also portrayed high-pressure oil pipelines crisscrossing Ogoni farmlands and villages. Through Saro-Wiwa's non-violent approach, the attention of the United Nations was attracted to the condition in the Niger Delta, and Ogoni land in particular.

Saro-Wiwa was unfortunately executed along side other nine Ogoni activists by the Nigerian military government under the rule of Gen. Sani Abacha on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, 1995. Nevertheless, his invaluable contribution to the civil right struggle in the Niger Delta and his relentless advocacy for non-violence action continued to generate a ripple effect. After his execution, the British government pressurized Shell to withdraw from Nigeria (In Search of Succor, 1994), private investors dumped Shell's shares in Britain, and US Shell disassociated itself from any involvement in Nigeria. Also, South Africa and Russia withdrew their envoys, while the European Union (EU) advocated for international boycott of Nigeria's oil (Investors Dump Shell, 1995).

In the light of the ensuing discourse, it is obvious therefore that Saro-Wiwa's non-violent approach in the Niger Delta generated more support from the international community than the violence carried out by the militants have achieved. 10 years after Saro-Wiwa's death, his non-violent ideology was still celebrated as the African Writer Abroad celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of his death in 2005. The association emphasized its commitment to Saro-Wiwa's ideology of non-violent and peaceful action in conflict resolution. (African Writers Abroad, 1995).

### **Gandhian Philosophy in the Niger Delta**

Having carried out a careful examination of the crisis in the Niger Delta, as well as the philosophy advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, we arrive at two salient observations; firstly, violence is yet to resolve the Niger Delta crisis, and secondly, non-violence has been proven by people and events to be very effective in conflict resolution. There is hardly a day that the Niger Delta is not featured in the news for one act of violence or the other perpetrated by the militants. The toll of kidnapping is escalating and the amount demanded for ransom is astronomical. Recently, the British government issued a release warning its nationals to stay away from the Niger Delta because of the growing rate of violence.

Since the death of Saro-Wiwa, there have been more violent campaigns than non-violent ones. One cannot but wonder if there would not have been a great improvement in the condition in the Niger Delta if his non-violent philosophy had been adhered to. At least he had succeeded in swaying public opinion in the favour of his cause. Saro-Wiwa, as did Martin Luther King Jr., based his campaigns on Gandhi's quest for truth. He investigated facts, both local and international, and his presentation of the same caught the attention of the international community. Since the degradation

engendered by the processes of oil exploration in the Niger Delta is obvious, the presentation of such truth is bound to make an impression on the international scene.

Gandhi's idea of non-violent action is not passive; hence, this paper does not suggest that the Niger Delta militants should surrender. It is however suggesting that arms should be set aside while non-violent actions are given preeminent priority. A massively mobilized civil disobedience, as advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, has a great potential of making an international statement and difference.

It cannot be overemphasized that the act of kidnapping for ransom has become a major bane in the legitimate struggle for justice in the Niger Delta. This act has dented the credibility of the current civil right struggle. At this stage, reference should be made to Gandhi's tenet of self-suffering. Militants should be willing to elevate the common good above personal interests. According to Gandhi (Spartacus, 2007), "through our pain we will make them see their injustice." The act of retaliation equates both the prey and the predator on the same platform of violence. Gandhi emphasized that death should not be avoided in the quest for truth. It is therefore not surprising to note that Gandhi, King, and Saro-Wiwa all died defending the cause they lived for. Gandhi and King were assassinated, while Saro-Wiwa was executed.

It is also note worthy that the three individuals examined in this work were thoroughly given to the art of writing in their struggle to defend what they stood for. All of them were imprisoned at one time or the other in the cause of their struggle, but their written works transverse continents advocating the ideology they represented. Though these three individuals have died, their advocacy for non-violent action has made them forces to be record with even in this current period of history. Niger Delta militants should engage in writing factual materials that will convey their struggle to the international scene. By engaging non-violent action, they will regain their credibility, and their struggle will become that of the world at large.

## Conclusion

The Niger Delta occupies a very strategic position in the Nigerian economy, though its development has been erstwhile ignored. The crisis level has reached such an alarming rate that it has become a major source of concern, not only locally, but also internationally. All attempts should be made to restore sanity to the area. The struggle of the communities in the Niger Delta is no doubt justified; however, the violence is inexcusable. The violence in the area has further degenerated the crisis rather than alleviated it. In the case of the Niger Delta, it is the oppressed that is preying on the oppressor through kidnaps and vandalization, yet the problem is not resolved. The militants in the Niger Delta should rather embark on a non-violent campaign which is capable of winning the support of the observing international community. This in itself will pave way for a better negotiation with the government and the multinational oil companies. If non-violent action is engaged, it will indeed be a struggle and not a war.

## Works Cited

- African Writers Abroad. *Dance the Gun to Silence: 100 Poems for Saro-Wiwa*. US: Flipped Eye Publishing, 1995.
- Alao, O. A. *Impact of Niger Delta Crises on Nigeria's National Security*. A Thesis Submitted to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2005.
- Aljazeera. "Three-year-old Kidnapped in Nigeria." Retrieved Aug 17, 2007, from <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres>
- Asakitikpi, E. A. & Oyelaran, A. P. "Oil Extraction and the Socio-cultural Impact on Peoples of the Niger Delta". A paper Presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Environmental Protection Society of Nigeria, 1999.
- Bondurant, J. V. *The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- "Dead Expatriate's Corpse Deposited at FMC", in *Punch*, August 14, 2007.

D'Souza, P. P. "Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr", in *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 20, 2003.

"In Search of Succor for Oil Communities", in *Guardian*, May 24, 1993.

Onua, N. *Ethnic Conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Study of Eleme and Okrika Communities*. A Thesis Submitted to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2005.

"Private Investors Dump Shell Shares in Britain", in *A M News*, November 2, 1995.

Saiyou, B. *Transnational Oil Corporations' Relationship with Oil Producing Communities in Bayelsa State: A Comparative Analysis*. A Thesis Submitted to the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2005.

"Saro-Wiwa Pleads Minority Cause at UN Commission", in *Daily Times*, September 19, 1992.