THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS: A MORAL APPRAISAL

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Introduction
For some years now, the problem in the Niger Delta seems to have defied solution. What started merely as agitations for better environment and employment space within the oil industry is gradually sliding into anarchy and full-scale insurgency.

The Niger Delta principally refers to the geographical area covering Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Edo, Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The area is inhabited by minority ethnic groups – Ijaw, Ogoni, Ibibio etc. all within the creek area of the river Niger. It is rated to be the third largest wetland in the world covering an estimated area of 70,000km². The whole area is transversed and criss-crossed by a large number of rivers, streams, rivulets, creeks and estuaries. Though a lot of political interest groups have tried to distort the make up of Niger Delta, historical facts before the discovery of oil show that originally, the region was inhabited by a group of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria.

It must be noted, that when the issue of the Niger Delta, as a special zone or territory, was first given official recognition, oil exploration had not started. But owing to fears of neglect by the majority ethnic groups in the country, these minorities made representations to the then colonial government demanding special legislative protection against discrimination and marginalisation. Thus, there was a reference in the 1958 Nigerian Constitution which ran as follows – “To allay the fears of the minority indigenes of the Niger Delta, and address the development needs of the peculiar terrain of the Niger Delta before granting independence to Nigeria, the British government proposed that the Niger Delta be declared a special Federal Territory”. So, there was already a Niger Delta problem prior to independence. The region was noted for its backwardness with regards to development arising from its peculiar terrain. The exploration of oil and its attendant revenue also brought a new dimension into the Niger Delta development needs.

It is instructive to note that some states now clamour for Niger Delta identify and insist on receiving special revenue and developmental attention, even though they do not have equal disadvantage of the difficult terrain of the
Niger Delta. Therefore, there has been a mix up between oil producing states and Niger Delta. Historically, these two are not the same. And to add to the woes of the people of the Niger Delta they were also disadvantaged politically and constituted a minority group in Nigeria. Hence, there was the need to carve the region out as a special development area under the oversight of the Federal Government. In fact, Sir, Willink Commission described the Niger Delta region as “poor, backward and neglected”. He equally described the people as the Ijaws residing in the swamp along the coast between Opobo and the mouth of Benin river.”³

**Petro-Business and Niger Delta**

Petroleum business in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial era and led to the enactment of the minerals Ordinance in 1914. The Ordinance granted the right of oil prospecting and exploration to Britain. This was the basis upon which Shell BP was granted the sole license for oil exploration in Nigeria. However, in 1957, Shell gave out part of its concessions to other companies. This paved the way for other oil companies like Mobil, Gulf, Agip, Safrap (ELF), Texaco and others to come into the oil business in Nigeria. At the early stage, the oil companies, maintained a 50-50 sharing arrangement with the government for the profit accruing from the oil business. Government, therefore, had no direct involvement in the oil business. It was purely the multinationals affair.

However in 1969, the federal government annulled the 1914 minerals Ordinance and effectively transferred the ownership of oil to the state. It equally set up an Oil Corporation in 1971 and entered into joint venture agreements with oil companies operating in Nigeria.⁴ This marked the beginning of the dependence of Nigerian economy on oil. Thus the Nigerian state moved from being a regulator to an interested party in the business of the oil companies, and gradually, the nation’s economy became intrinsically tied to oil. However, as it were, “Nigeria became deeply dependent on a commodity it did not control. The resultant vulnerability to the oil multinationals particularly Shell Petroleum Development Company, a subsidiary of Royal Shell Group, which produced half of Nigerian oil, and the volatile oil market were to have telling effects on Nigerian political economy”.⁵

This development compromised the neutrality of the government in mediating in matters between the oil companies and the host communities. Each time the multinationals are making more profit, it translates into more money for the government. Therefore, there is a strong alliance of interest between state officials and the oil companies. Again most state officials and frontline politicians have serious interest in the petro-business.