

Slipping Into Darkness: Nigeria on the Brink

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When Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and her entourage touch down this week in Abuja, the bright new capital of the Nigerian federation, their hosts will try to put the best face on what is the gravest political crisis the country has faced since the civil war ended almost four decades ago. The uninspired government of President Musa Yar' Adua, who took office in 2007 on the back of elections massively fraudulent even by Nigeria's appallingly low standards, is confronting a dual political crisis of considerable gravity. In the oil-producing Niger delta a long simmering military insurgency has crippled the oil and gas industry which accounts for over three-quarters of government revenues and virtually all of Nigeria's exports. A counter-insurgency by federal forces launched in May 2009 produced a ferocious response by the insurgents including in July an audacious attack on key oil installations in Lagos, the economic capital of the country. Oil production has collapsed, spectacularly, to barely 1 million barrels per day (at least a million barrels a day are shut-in). Shell, the largest single operator, has closed its Western operations entirely, and its Eastern operations are barely functional. 12,000 oil workers have been made redundant, having fled the rigs, platforms and other facilities due to security problems.

In the north of Nigeria, the Muslim heartland and the base of the powerful ruling northern oligarchy, a Taliban-styled Islamist group - Boko Haram - was brutally repressed by government security forces in early August. Massive bombardment of the movement's compound resulted in large numbers of casualties, and culminated in the extra-judicial killing of the movement's leader Mohammed Yusuf in Maiduguri at the hands of the police. In short, two of the most strategic economic and political regions of the Nigerian federation are in effect under lockdown.

President Yar 'Adua, a bland and unimpressive former teacher from Katsina, has been disastrously ineffective and indecisive since assuming power - failings compounded by his own ill-health. After two years of drift and serial ineptitude, Nigeria now stands at a tipping point. The international community seems largely uninterested in the deteriorating conditions or at the very least unprepared to consider any constructive role in Nigeria. Murdered activist Ken Saro-Wiwa's dark premonition - his 1990 prediction of a "coming war" unless the needs of the oil producing communities were met - hangs like a pall over contemporary Nigeria.

Nigeria is an oil-rich petro-state but its developmental record is one of catastrophic failure. According to the IMF, the \$700 billion in oil revenues since 1960 have added almost nothing to the standard of living of the average Nigerian. Eighty-five per cent of oil revenues accrue to one per cent of the population and a huge proportion of the country's wealth - perhaps 40 per cent or more, has been stolen. Over the last decade GDP per capita and life expectancy have, according to World Banks, both fallen. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), ranks Nigeria in terms of human development - a composite measure of life expectancy, income, and educational attainment - on par with Haiti and Congo.

Nigeria has become a vast shadow economy and shadow state in which the lines between public and the private, state and market, government and organized crime are blurred and porous. The coastal waters of the delta are, according to the International Maritime Bureau, a pirate-haven, comparable to the lawless seas surrounding Somalia and the Moluccas. A new study, Transnational Trafficking and the Rule of Law in West Africa by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime, estimates that 55 million

barrels of oil are stolen each year from the Niger delta, a shadow economy in which high ranking military and politicians are deeply involved. Amnesty International's report *Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta* released in June 2009 grimly inventories the vast environmental despoliation caused by 1.5 million tons of spilled oil, describing the record of the slick alliance of the international oil companies and the Nigerian state as a "human rights tragedy".

The raw and undiluted realities of contemporary Nigeria are on full display in the Niger delta crisis: a wholly unaccountable oil revenue allocation system, structural corruption especially at the state and local government levels, a history of pervasive electoral fraud and political thuggery, and a state-sanctioned lawless oil frontier in which politics has come to mean nothing more than a vicious struggle, waged by any means necessary, to capture oil rents. Immense quantities of oil are stolen organized by a syndicate of 'bunkerers' linking low-level youth operatives and thugs in the creeks to the highest levels of the Nigerian military and political classes and to the oil companies themselves. A former Managing Director of Chevron Nigeria once observed that he had "run companies that have had less production than is being bunkered in [Nigeria]". The stolen oil, siphoned from the manifolds and flowstations, shipped onto barges and transported to tankers off shore, is a multi-billion business run through the state. The cesspool of what passes as government is presided over by powerful and typically corrupt state governors and influential political godfathers. As former anti-corruption czar Nuhu Ribadu put it, before he was fired and hounded out of the country on Yar' Adua's watch, the state is "not even corruption, it is organized crime".

The turn from peaceful non-violence of the sort advocated by Ken Saro-Wiwa to armed struggle, culminated in the dramatic appearance in late 2005 of a new group – the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta – who launched a frontal attack on oil installation in the name of 'resource control' and a 'new federalism'. In three years they have in effect brought the oil industry to a standstill. Hostage taking – not only of oil workers, but also politicians, even children – has become a major growth industry. Many international oil and oil service companies have simply withdrawn personnel and shut-up shop.

The federal government has failed conspicuously to grasp the gravity of political sentiments across the multi-ethnic oilfields. A large survey of Niger delta oil communities by the World Bank in 2007 discovered that an astonishing 36.23 per cent of youth interviewed revealed a "willingness or propensity to take up arms against the state". Government sees the problem almost wholly in term of criminality. But history teaches us that any insurgency is a mix of greed and grievance – and one person's criminal or terrorist is another's liberation fighter. The recent survey poll released in 2009 report shows clearly that local communities have no faith whatsoever in the state and local government but government acts as if they do. The incontestable fact, as Ledum Mittee, the Ogoni human rights campaigner, has pointed out, is that there is overwhelming popular sympathy across the Delta for what the militants are doing and saying. This is no less the case with Haram Boko, a movement whose anti-Western sentiments speak powerfully to a generation of Muslims for whom modern development and education has brought poverty, unemployment and a souring of the very idea of secular national development.

President Yar' Adua announced an amnesty plan for the Niger delta militants on June 25 and released Henry Okay, an important leader MEND leader, on July 13, 2009. Good news in principle. But there are two things to be said here. First, an amnesty may well draw the criminals and political thugs out of the creeks (people who were put there in effect by their political Godfathers in the 2003 and 2007 elections). But this assumes that the problem is largely or wholly criminal – which it is not. Those with a political project will not be so easily convinced. And second, why should they? The history of state promises has been one of duplicity, violence and repression. Trust in government are words rarely heard in the creeks. An amnesty is hardly a solution. As Okay himself said upon his release: "no one is fighting for an amnesty". The amnesty is simply an opportunity for "frank talks"

and discussions of “root problems”. But there is precious little of this in the offing right now.

Second, many of the militants began their lives as thugs deployed for the purpose of electoral intimidation. With the same political godfathers readying themselves for the elections in two years, the promise of an amnesty offers no assurance against a grotesque replay of politically-sponsored violence in the next electoral cycle.

Radical change - and enormous political courage - will be required if there is to be lasting peace. Large-scale training programs and mass employment schemes, major infrastructure projects, and environmental rehabilitation, will take many years, perhaps even generations. For the present the temperature within the Delta must be reduced and a meaningful peace process established. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the future of Nigeria rests on how government responds to this window of opportunity. Another failure of will, at this juncture, could prove to be catastrophic.

The government amnesty covers the period August 4 to October 4: the MEND ceasefire, in principle, ends on September 15. Something bold has to happen soon. Any comprehensive approach to resolving the crisis in the Niger Delta can only be built on the ruins of two decades and more of broken promises, suspicion, and violence. Serious dialogue and the central involvement by a credible third-party mediator - perhaps Senator Feingold or the Elders - will be indispensable to any forward movement. It will not be easy but it is imperative. Secretary Clinton should convey this message in the strongest terms but also highlight two important opportunities. First, the Nigerian senate is in the middle of debating a new petroleum bill capable of addressing some of the core concerns of Niger delta activists. Already there are signs that the new bill will ignore the voices of the oil communities. Second, the government commissioned a forty-three person Technical Committee to provide a strategy for the future of the Niger delta. The report has languished since its release in November 2008 in spite of the fact that it contains a clear blueprint for moving forward. Here at least is a place to start.

P.S.

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