The Role of State and Non-State Actors in Arms Proliferation Dynamics in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

The proliferation of arms, complex protracted armed conflicts, and amplified insecurity with critical impact on governance and social development in the Niger Delta has elicited tremendous concern. The problematic is about the dynamics of acquisition, stockpiling, sources and supplies, as well as huge availability of arms in the region. The objective of this work is the examination of the role of state and non-state actors in the arms proliferation dynamics in the region. The study adopted the Greed and Grievance Theory to explain the involvement of both state and non-state actors in the competitive proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta. It employed the historical and empirical methods of data gathering to anchor the analysis, and argued that the complex interaction between the state and non-state actors in the political economy of the Niger Delta was responsible for the massive proliferation of small arms and light weapons proliferation in the region. The work concluded that both state and non-state actors play critical roles in the arms proliferation dynamics in the Niger Delta.

Introduction

Arms proliferation in the Niger Delta is the radical internalization of the process of a spiraling quest for and stockpiling of arms and ammunitions by regional stakeholders and actors (Klare, 1999, p.16). The history of the Niger Delta established that arms proliferation is a constant in the economic transitions of the region beginning from the slave trade and palm oil trade to the crude oil economy of the contemporary period. The historical struggles for access to and control of economic resources generated inter- and intra-communal conflicts as well as arms struggle in the region. Firearms were first introduced into the Niger Delta from Europe with the inauguration of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the second half of the 15^{lh} century. Small arms and light weapons were used by the Europeans as items of trade in exchange for slaves from the Niger Delta coastal peoples

(Inikori, 1977, p.341). These firearms were extensively used in slave raiding and aggressive pursuit of the succeeding trade in palm produce.

More so, the distinct pattern of state formation and commercial development in pre-colonial Niger Delta led to a complex system of fluid alliances as they engaged one another in armed conflicts to gain access to and control of markets and sources of commodities. Therefore, nineteenth-century Niger Delta witnessed various intra- and inter-city-states' conflicts over commercial interests resulting in war (Dike, 1956, pp.99-100). This phenomenon evolved into a culture of antagonism that warranted the stockpiling of firearms by the different groups either for self-defence or first strike capability. The contemporary phenomenon of small arms trafficking and proliferation in the Niger Delta is only a resurgence of an old activity embedded in its pre-colonial exchange relations with the Europe and Africa and the process of state formation in the region. It is the most militarized region of Nigeria with the largest collection of SALWs (Ukeje, 2006, p.29).

Prior to the inauguration of colonial rule, Britain promulgated legislations against the importation of firearms into the Niger Delta in 1880, and the Customs Ordinance by the Niger Coast Protectorate banning the importation of rifles, rifled cannons, machine guns, and rifle ammunitions in 1891 (Ukeje, 2006, pp.24-5). Following the inauguration of British colonial rule, these promulgations were implemented with the conduct of series of expeditions between 1900 and 1910 (Ofonagoro, 1979, p.171), which prompted most war-canoe House heads to empty their arsenals into the sea. However, over twelve decades after Consul Macdonald proposed that the best way to discourage communities' participation in arms acquisition was to gain the confidence and goodwill of community leaders in the Niger Delta, the situation has since degenerated from "bad to worse" as there has been a resurgence and upsurge of small arms proliferation in the region. The crude oil economy of the post-colonial era redefined and accentuated its complexity. Hardly did the post-colonial Nigerian-state consolidate itself when it was confronted by an armed insurrection and the declaration of a Niger Delta Republic in 1966 announcing the advent of acute revolutionary tendencies and the resurgence of arms race between state and non-state actors in the region (Naanen, 2004, p.5).

The contemporary accumulation and availability of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta following the inauguration of democratic rule have resulted to outright insurgency, militia enclaves, private armies, cult wars, militancy, communal conflicts, inter-group wars, kidnapping and hostage-taking in the region. By the early 1990s, most local communities of the Niger Delta region have resorted to the formation of vigilante

groups and acquisition of arms to build strong arsenals to secure themselves from external attacks due to the incessant inter-communal conflicts, anti-government uprisings and anti-Multi-National Oil Companies (MNOCs) protests in the region. The conflicts were related to the dynamics of the petroleum economy and the inability of the Nigerian-state to effectively initiate processes to guarantee social development and equal access to the economic benefits of the region's resources. Moreover, the conflicts heightened the dynamics of arms proliferation and stockpiling in the region. This study examined the role of state actors and non-state actors in the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Theory of Greed and Grievance to analyze the dynamics of arms proliferation in the region. The twin concepts of greed and grievance are major factors in the determination of armed mobilization and violent crises. Greed presupposes that parties to violent conflicts are motivated by the anticipated gains they intend to derive from partaking in conflicts, which facilitates the outbreak of violence (Collier & Hoefler, 2004, pp.563-595; Reno, 2000, pp.43-68). On the other hand, grievance presupposes that people are motivated to partake in conflicts due to prolonged grievances and unresolved discontent. This school of thought of the conflict dynamics has elicited the interest of researchers on relative deprivation and horizontal inequalities as critical factors responsible for armed conflicts (Douma, 2006, pp.59-69). The greed and grievance theory has contributed immensely to our knowledge of the outbreak of violent conflicts and the emergence of militia groups. The so-called neo-political economy perspective is a function of extensive belief in economic causation, too little politics and no history at all. This is due, in part, to lack of effort to properly confine the benefit of captors or ruling elites and the suffering masses in their proper social perspective (Ukiwo, 2009, p.2).

Relating the theory of greed and grievance to the Niger Delta, from 1956 when crude oil was discovered in commercial quantity to the present, the region has not fully enjoyed the benefits from this resource, which finances much of the operations and activities of the federal and state governments in Nigeria. There exists a "slick alliance" between global capitalism and the Nigerian-state to impoverish and decimate the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region (Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.30), which attracted reactionary tendencies and militant resistance from the youths and resulted in the proliferation of arms. The Niger Delta is rich in natural mineral resources, but its people have remained largely in poverty and its environment despoiled by the gruesome exploitation of its resources to warrant the current massive reactionary tendencies (Asuni, 2009, p.1). Due to the high-level of corruption in Nigeria's public space, particularly among political elites, community leaders, oil company personnel and group

leaders, resources meant for community development and distribution for the benefit of the people are diverted to benefit just few individuals rather than the public interest. It is the rival desire of stakeholders in the Niger Delta to access and control the resources in the Niger Delta that has been instrumental to causing conflict across the region.

Empirical research showed that the motivations of youth groups' participation in arms proliferation in the Niger Delta revolve around their reactions to the greed of politicians in the region, their intentions to share in the loots of the politicians through their involvement in the process of elections rigging, voters intimidation and attack of opponents, and the desire to enrich themselves through criminal economy prompted by a keener awareness of the riches to be gained from gun running, oil bunkering and kidnapping (Asuni, 2009, p.4). Furthermore, the Niger Delta is united by a sense of common grievance against the exploitation and neglect of the region by the Federal Government and MNOCs. The Federal Government appears to have virtually supported the MNOCs in their rapacious exploitation of the resources and degradation of the Niger Delta environment and ignored the region in terms of development leaving it at the mercy of the MNOCs in an era when corporate social responsibility meant little or nothing compared to the proceeds and gains of oil exploitation that accrue to the Federal Government and MNOCs. Today, the region is bedeviled by unrest and insurgency complicated by a mixture of greed, crime, protest and political collusion.

State Actors and Arms Proliferation Dynamics in the Niger Delta

The commercial transition in the nineteenth century led to a shift from legal importation of arms to illicit acquisition (smuggling) following the activities of the British naval squadrons to stop slave trade and arms importation. Consequently, while Britain was arming the gun-boats, Spain and France were arming Niger Delta merchants and liberalized arms supply and acquisition in the nineteenth century (Asuk, 2013: 137). The consuls and European traders engaged in the palm oil trade continued to provide arms to antagonistic Niger Delta groups (Wariboko 1999: 154; Erekosima et al, 1991: 22). **The current atmosphere of conflict that** fostered arms spread in the Niger Delta arose from the various government policies that affected the development of the region and livelihood of its people. These included: the enactment of the Petroleum Act of 1969, which denied the people of the region access to land rents by the federal government; denial of royalties accruable from oil exploitation; repeal of the principles of derivation and introduction of revenue allocation formula; promulgation of the Inland Waterways Regulations of 1977 and the Land Use Decree of 1978; the political marginalization of the Niger Delta ethnic minorities; the gross nonchalant response of oil companies and government to environmental degradation and despoliation; the MNOCs neglect of

corporate social responsibility and the Nigerian-state deliberate underdevelopment of the region; and, the policy of coercion and repression to protests and agitations in the Niger Delta.

The primary role of state actors in the arms proliferation dynamics in the Niger Delta is directly linked to its deliberate policy to marginalize and under-develop the region, which prompted initial peaceful protests. The persistent indifference of the government to complaints and agitations of the people led to the conclusion that only confrontation with the oil firms and government could guarantee the actualization of their demands. Under such circumstances, the acquisition of firearms by groups and individuals who claimed to be championing the cause of the region began to obtain popular acceptance. In an effort to tame the incessant agitations and crises that followed, the government, rather than using dialogue, adopted the coercive and repressive methods. The state mobilized and deployed military forces operating like an army of occupation to demobilize youths protesting the marginalization of their communities through deterrence and a show of maximum force. Examples of such repressive high-profile military and security initiatives of the Nigerian-state include: the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), Operation Sweep, Operation Fire-for-Fire, Operation Hacurri (I & II), Operation Restore Hope, Operation Flush (I, II & III), Operation Salvage, Operation Pulo Shield, Operation Tsare Teku, Operation Delta Safe, Operation Crocodile Smile, Operation Sting, etc, (Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.32; Ayoyo and Oriola, 2018, pp.41-59).

Though these deployments of troops were necessitated by the desire to quell unrests, the consequences have been grave as was exemplified at Umuechem in 1990, Ogoniland in 1993/4, Choba and Odi in 1999 (Human Right Watch, 1999). The assertion that "military might dramatically escalated violence as militant groups emerged provoking bloody clashes with federal troops deployed to contain violence" is credible (Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.32). The tendency of military deployment has inculcated in the youth the culture of militarization and accentuated the accumulation of firearms in the Niger Delta. The marginalization, suppression and repression orchestrated in the region led to the formation of armed ethnic militias and private armies that now dare the authority and legitimacy of the state and operate outside the effective control of traditional governance institutions and structures, resist state's rampaging military machine and militarization of socio-political relations. According to Cesarz, et al (2003, cited in Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.32), the Niger Delta militias brought to the confrontation with the state new assets like rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47s, machine guns, satellite phones and speedboats, and demonstrated the capacity to upset the state security system in the region.

Another way the state played a major role in the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta is through political restructuring with undefined boundaries and citing of critical infrastructures on disputed frontiers. These acts of the Nigerian-state has generated violent conflicts resulting in colossal arms proliferation as demonstrated by the inter-ethnic crisis between Eleme and Okrika in Rivers State over the ownership of the land on which the Port Harcourt Refinery is sited. With the outbreak of the Eleme-Okrika and Andoni-Ogoni conflicts in the 1990s, these communities constructed collective communal responses as wealthy and influential indigenes of the communities made huge investments in the procurement and stockpiling of arms to fortify and defend their communities against external attacks as well as prosecute the wars. In Okrika, besides the procurement of arms, the chiefs and influential members of the kingdom tasked each War-Canoe House to nominate two able men to defend the community. This was the origin of the militia group known as the "Bush Boys" who defended Okrika against Eleme. According to Joab-Peterside (2005, p.34), "Through this process, small arms became readily available in the communities". In the middle of 2004, "each village in the Niger Delta was known to have between 20 and 100 AK-47s in armouries" (Davis, 2009, p.31).

Moreover, the Joint Venture operations between the Nigeria National Petroleum Company (NNPC) and the MNOCs has tacitly encouraged the proliferation of firearms in the region. The SPDC, for instance, was granted permit by the Nigerian-state to supply firearms to security men in Ogoni land during the 1993/94 crisis (Obasi, 2005, p.93). Also, the federal government in 2008 spent over N480 billion to procure firearms on behalf of the oil companies in the region under the guise of protecting oil pipeline installations and facilities (Joab-Peterside et al, 2011, p.55). The army and other security agencies, most times, acted as promoters of conflict in the Niger Delta crisis due to their allegiance to joint ventures relationship between the MNOCs and state-owned NNPC. This interaction empowered the oil companies, especially SPDC, to invite federal troops to quell protests against their operations in the region as in the case of Umuechem in November 1990 and Ogoni between 1993 and 1995 when SPDC consistently invited the then Rivers State Internal Security Task Force (RSISTF) under Major Paul Okuntimo for military and security assistance (HRW, 1995).

The Nigerian-state voracious clamp down on social movements like the Ijo Youth Council (IYC) in the Niger Delta while protesting against the political domination, poverty and economic exclusion of the region by the state in collaboration with the MNOCs necessitated self-defensive mechanisms and massive arms acquisition to confront the state military repressive operations. With the inauguration of democratic rule in 1999, the

formidable grassroots structure of the IYC attracted the patronage of the state political and traditional elites leading to its deployment for political gains and its subsequent polarization and initiation of an internal arms race by rival factions (Joab-Peterside, 2005; Nwajiaku-Dahou, 2007; Asuk, 2018). This swayed the recommendation of factions to such MNOCs as SPDC for oil pipeline surveillance contracts, which, in turn, provided huge capital for further arms acquisition and stockpiling in the Niger Delta. The surveillance contracts heightened illegal oil bunkering and enhanced the lethal capacities of militant groups who struggled for supremacy as between Asari Dokubo's Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and Ateke Tom's Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV). From 2003, these illegal oil bunkerers emerged as marketers of violence and principal agents of arms proliferation (Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.40).

Furthermore, at the end of 2000, the National Chairman of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Tony Anenih (Mr. Fix it), caused the gathering of youth leaders from every part of the country in Abuja for the formation of a national youth alliance, the Grand Alliance of Nigeria (GAN). After the event, the youth leaders were provide with huge amount of funds by the Party national hierarchy for the provision of crucial support to deliver the PDP in the 2003 elections. In Rivers State, the Dr. Peter Odili-led government patronized Asari Dokubo-led armed gang and provided fund for which Asari helped Ateke Tom sourced arms to help PDP secure the 2003 election victory. According to Davis (2009, p.64),

> The contract provided Ateke Tom with weapons and money to enable him to firstly rid Okrika of rival militia who were opposed to the incumbent governor and then to intimidate the voters and rival candidates in Okrika, Ogu/Bolo and Port Harcourt Local Government Areas…Soon Dr. Sekibo arranged for weapons and ammunition to be directly supplied to Ateke and his forces. For this purpose, on at least one occasion, Dr. Sekibo arranged for weapons and ammunition to be carried and supplied to Ateke Tom using the State Government House ambulance.

After ensuring the victory of the PDP at the 2003 poll, the warlords were compensated hugely. For example, Ateke Tom of the NDV was "given a free rein to carry out profitable bunkering activities in exchange for his group's violent services during the 2003 elections" (Joab-Peterside, 2005, p.47).

Non-State Actors in Arms Proliferation in the Niger Delta

The political restructuring and social transformations that occurred in the Niger Delta in

the transition from pre-colonial to post-colonial society were driven by such critical institutions as the 'War-Canoe House', which assumed greater importance in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in the city-states. Sadly, their desire to advance trading territories and dominate trade routes and control markets heightened the proliferation and trafficking of firearms in the Niger Delta (White, 1971, p.177). From 1750, over five guns were paid by European merchants for each African slave at the Bonny port (Inikori, 1977, pp.350-4). By the close of the eighteenth century, a huge quantity of guns had entered the Niger Delta. In Bonny alone, for the period 1791-2, there were 198 Spanish guns, 101 blunderbusses and 1,607 Bonny guns (1,906 guns in all) from only one of James Rogers & Co of Bristol vessels, and 3,400 guns in 1792 alone, while the vessel *Jupiter* supplied 1,942 guns in 1792-3. The largest quantities of firearms exported from Europe into Africa between 1750 and 1807 entered the Niger Delta through Bonny (Inikori 1977: 350-4). Firearms purchased in this era were used for wars of aggression, raids, hunting for ivory and elephant tusks, "adequate defensive arrangements against ... raids", and for "decoration of habitation" (Inikori 1977: 349-350; Hopkins 1973: 110).

As late as 1864, each Canoe-House in Bonny possessed 2,500 musketeers and the city-state had an "abundance of ammunitions, ships, swivels and carronades ..." (Dike 1956: 107; Hopkins 1973: 124). During the Bonny Civil War of 1869, war canoes carried *howitzers*: "while Africans did the fighting, the opposing British interests supplied their respective allies with weapons of war (Dike 1956: 195). Jaja's arsenal in the Jaja-Ibeno war of 1881 had a comparable equipage with Nana's *one hundred canoes with five coxswains, each carrying two large cannons, 24 blunderbusses, besides a large number of flint-lock guns* (Kolapo 2007: 90-1). With the intensification of commercial competition and rivalries over export of palm produce, Niger Delta merchants undertook significant technical-military adaptations of European firearms to the canoes. After the Akassa war of 1895, the retrieved arms and ammunitions included: *106 cannons, 445 blunderbusses with swivel for mounting on war-canoes, a machine gun, 1500 flintlock guns, 14 tons of gunpowder, and 100 case shots of bamboo with iron balls and scrap metals as well as riffles, and percussion guns* (Kalu 1980: 13). The Brass war-canoes that attacked the Royal Niger Company's station at Akassa in 1895 were reportedly fitted with *blunderbusses*, and each canoe carrying a couple of *muzzle-loading* cannons mounted in the bow and stern (Kolapo 2007: 90-1).

At the height of indigenous accumulation and power in the Niger Delta, coastal merchant-potentates competitively expended huge percentage of their accumulation in the acquisition of arms and ammunition, and possessed armouries of magnificent sizes to enhance their capacity for further exploitation and primitive accumulation (Asuk 2013: 121). For instance, King Karibo Amachree of New Calabar spent about 1,000 Spanish

dollars in 1851 and two-times that amount to procure guns of special specifications in 1855 (Wariboko 1999: 154). Similarly, a good number of Dublin-Green's guns and cannons in the Bonny-Abonnema war of 1881 were custom-made with Brass from Glasgow, according to his specifications, with his name and the signature of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, on them. The armoury of Inikiiroari Young-Briggs of Abonnema was a magnificent exhibition of the wealth of a very successful merchant-chief and war-canoe director (Keni-Briggs 19/02/2012). The intense competition and rivalry for market increased the demand for and circulation of firearms so that the chain of supply of firearms was extended to the hinterland to boost trade. The massive quantity of arms in the hinterland as demonstrated by the British recovery in Arochukwu in 1902 prompted the colonial promulgation of the Firearms Proclamation of 1902 to outlaw the possession and trafficking of firearms (F.O 520/14:18682 of May 1902).

The inauguration of colonialism and anti-firearms promulgations greatly checked the proliferation of arms, but political independence witnessed its resurgence with Isaac Boro-led Niger Delta Volunteer Force's (NDVF's) declaration of a Niger Delta Republic in February 1966 and the Nigerian Civil War (1967-70). From the 1990s, arms proliferation became directly linked to Niger Delta communities' anti-Nigerian-state and MNOC's insurgency as well as intra- and inter-ethnic and communal conflicts like the Eleme-Okrika, Ogoni-Andoni, Ijaw-Itsekiri and Itsekiri- Urhobo crises (Asuk, 2018, p.97). The role of communities in arms accumulation in the Niger Delta can also attributed to greed, grievance, and community policing/security as the scramble for access to oil rents complicated chieftaincy/leadership tussles. In the 1990s, most local communities in the region had formed vigilante groups, a model of informal armed security structures and acquired arms for members to defend communities against external attacks and fight internal crime. Okrika provided a good example of the formation of such group, pejoratively known as the Bush Boys, in 1999. This group mobilized against Eleme in their struggle over the land on which the Port Harcourt Refinery Company was situated (Kalio, 2006).

The group was funded with financial support from donations by powerful and wealthy members of the Okrika community, chiefs and local leaders. A former field commander of the Okrika Vigilante group, Gashion Iwari, offered that they were nick-named "the Bush Boys" by Abiye Sekibo for rejecting its integration into his political structure. Thus, Dr. Sekibo later engaged, funded and armed Ateke Tom and the Icelander/Viking groups to eliminate the Bush Boys. The situation degenerated into intra-communal warfare in which the then IYC President, Asari Dokubo unsuccessfully attempted to intervene (Don-Pedro, 2006, p. 91). The row worsened the rival claims to the *Amanyanabo* stool of Okrika

by the Koniju and Tuboniju. Subsequently, Ateke group drove out the Bush Boys and members of the All Nigerian People's Party from Okrika (Joab-Peterside, 2005; Safer Africa, 2004). This is the reflection of the greed of political and community leaders prompted the arming of loyal followers and turned them into a political fighting machine. Other examples of violent inter-communal crises in the Niger Delta that triggered large-scale acquisition and stockpiling of small arms included the Okpoama-Ewuoma, and Koluama-Sangama (Ebiede, 2006, pp.7-14).

In Nigeria, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) (later GMOU) is signed between the MNOC and the host community prior to the commencement of an oil/gas exploration project. The fulfilment of the terms of the MOU is meant to compensate for the depletion of resources and environmental impact of oil exploitation on the resource-bearing communities (Vanguard, 2007). However, the oil companies usually adopted the strategy of divide and rule by favouring and inciting one group against another in the community through the dispensing of benefits and payment of money to a select few, which have triggered complex social conflicts and arms proliferation in the region. In Rumuekpe, Rivers State, for instance, SPDC distributed community development funds and contracts through the youth leader and community liaison officer (Friday Edu) for over 10 years, an arrangement that caused intra-communal conflict (2005-2008) between Edu and Agala factions leading to the death of over 60 persons, destruction of houses and other social infrastructures schools. Rumuekpe became a community associated with different types of arms weapons, arms and ammunition (Smith, 2011).

The practice of paying compensations and the award of multi-million-dollar maintenance contracts for surveillance over oil wells, the Trans-Niger Pipeline (TNP) its booster stations, and flow-stations in Rumuekpe to Edu's gang in 2006 brought about armed struggle and communal violence (Smith, 2011). Also, the altercation between Bille and Ke in the region was as a result of the dispute over the right to ownership of land where two SPDC flow-stations were sited (HRW, 2002). Such actions of SPDC paying whoever controlled access to their oil facilities, especially during conflicts, exacerbated tensions and provided regular funding for the purchase of firearms and heightened the struggle for control of access to oil facilities. Such strategy also escalated the conflict between Soku and Oluasiri communities in Rivers State where SPDC named a gas plant situated in the area after Soku, whereas the facility was actually located on Oluasiri land. This dispute aggravated the age-old conflict between the communities and led to the death of 18 persons in September 2003 (Niger Delta News, 2003). Moreover, large sums of money were distributed to armed gangs that had control over access to its facilities in other parts of the region and a great portion of such resources was channeled towards acquiring

more sophisticated arms and ammunition by the gangs thereby firming the proliferation of firearms in the region.

With the rise of youth militancy in the Niger Delta, the oil companies in turn, have been forced to deal directly with the youth in order to maintain undisrupted oil operations. The IOCs empowered armed groups with arms and funds through surveillance contracts to protect their oil installations. According to Chukwu Azikwe, an ex-militant and member of Icelander cult group at Rumuekpe, 'we were given money and that is what we use in buying arms... and to sustain the fight' (Smith, 2011). The same happened in Kolo Creek where Asamaowie, Clever Owie and Imotimi were empowered with funds by SPDC to secure their operations, while Ike Ogina of the KGB was empowered as a contractor by Elf in the Orashi area. Investigation has also revealed that during the Ogoni crisis, SPDC supplied arms to security men and warring factions within communities in Ogoniland (Obasi, 2005, p.93). The ultimate consequence of the IOCs' direct dealings with the youths, rather than developing projects with long-term communal benefits, has increased the acquisition of arms for the prosecution of the violent struggle among contending parties. Between October 2004 and June 2005, only about five thousand weapons were returned to the military through a *gun-for-money* deal financed by the Rivers State Government in the bargain to reduce the volume of SALWs in the Niger Delta region (Davis 2009: 71).

The corruption associated with Nigerian politics created perfect conditions for armed groups, arms proliferation and violence to flourish in the Niger Delta through the process of building scary political structures to deliver electoral victories. With the return to civilian rule in 1999, many political elites stockpiled small arms in warehouses for elections (HRW, 2005). The politicians engaged idle youths and empowered them with firearms or money to procure arms, while many cult groups with firearms were also financially induced to ensure their victory at elections. Before and during the 1999 and 2003 elections the political parties, especially the People's Democratic Party (PDP), hired armed gangs to intimidate political opponents. In Rivers State, there was widespread violence in which sophisticated weapons were used without restriction (Okonofua, 2011). Abiye Sekibo, a former Secretary to the Rivers State Government, used the state government ambulance acquired and supplied cache of sophisticated firearms to Ateke Tom and his NDV (Vangaurd, June 25, 2008; Davis, 2009, p.l5).

In Cross Rivers state, over 54 guns were recovered by the police from politicians and their aides in 2002 (Soetan, 2017, p35), while in Edo state, Lucky Imasuen, a governorship candidate of the ANPP, was arrested in 2002 in possession of firearms (Thisday, July 31,

2002). Adams Oshomole, a former governor of Edo State, also patronized cult and gun-running groups and funded the Neo-Black Movement (Black axe) group, which he used to secure electoral victories. According to Tony Kabaka, a repentant cultist, Oshiomole once paid N35million to the Neo-Black group in 2012 and a further reward of 80 political appointments in his government. The arming of youths in the Niger Delta by politicians 'transformed the dynamics of small arms proliferation'. The funds from politicians to the armed gangs added to what they acquired through other criminal enterprises like bunkering and kidnappings to increase their arsenals with more sophisticated arms (Lubeck, et al, 2007, p.8). In 2018, the coalition of Niger Delta Agitators raised an alarm over politicians' stockpiling of firearms in preparation for the 2019 elections. The report revealed that about 48,000 pieces of AK-47 with over 5,000 fake military and police uniforms were shipped into Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Rivers states (Akasike, 2018).

A 2007-study for the Delta State Government found out about forty-eight recognizable militant groups in the state and boasting of more than 25,000 members and with an arsenal of approximately 10,000 weapons. It was reported that there were up to 60,000 members of armed groups in the Niger Delta. All of the groups relied on the tacit support of local communities that share their anger at the exploitation of their region by oil companies and the federal and state governments (Asuni, 2009). The relationship between cult groups and armed militias is very close. In late 2003, in an effort to increase their access to weapons and other resources, many of the "cult" groups formed alliances with either Asari or Ateke Tom's armed group as the two leaders fought for the control of oil bunkering routes. The clamour for resource control and the agitation for self-determination in the region became a rallying point for the armed and cult groups to express their grievances against the state and MNOCs in open confrontations and increased firearms acquisitions. This was aggravated by the patronage from politicians who hired and supplied small arms to jobless youths in the wake of general elections which led to its misuse and 'transformed the Niger Delta' into a theatre of arms proliferation (Lubeck, et al, 2007, p.8).

Asari, for instance, stated in 2004 that he owned 67 boats, each armed with two light machine guns (Newswatch, 2004, p.l0), and more than 3,000 assault rifles (IRIN, 2004). Tompolo was reported to have over 8 gunboats, 'General Commander' of the NDPVF, Columbus Epebada, once boasted, 'we have the GPMG [general purpose machine gun], the self- loading rifle, AK-47, MG [machine guns] and several others. We have over five thousand arms among which the GPMG alone are up to 273 (Abubakar & Bello, 2004, p.l7). Investigation revealed that these weapons were readily available for purchase in Warri at prices that range from around N80, 000 (U.S.$570) for a shotgun or N120, 000

($850) for an AK-47 rifle, and about N300, 000 ($2,150) for a "bazooka" (Bisina, 2003). Militants were empowered with weapons or the funds and required contacts to buy them from political elites and even members of the government (HRW, 2005).

Illegal oil bunkering has reportedly been a significant source of revenue for both the NDPVF and the NDV. Weapons exchanged for stolen or bunkered oil, captured or seized from local stocks or bought from corrupt individuals also added to the armed group stockpiles. These include arms captured from, or sold by the Nigeria Police and army personnel; those captured or bought from Cameroonian soldiers stationed in the Bakassi peninsula and those purchased from ex-Nigerian soldiers from peace-keeping operations. One group leader claims that arms are available from vessels just off the coast, and can be purchased by anybody who can afford them.

Between 2004 and 2007, violence was intensified in the region by the militants which prompted the federal government to acquire more military hardware to counter the growing capabilities of the militants (Saslin & Pearson, 2006, p.154).

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) as an assemblage of many Ijaw ethnic militia groups and cult gangs in the Niger Delta was very significant in the phenomenon of arms proliferation in the region. According to its spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, MEND was a combination of all the arm bearing groups in the Niger Delta fighting for resource control (Obi, 2009, p.123). Tom Polo, the military and spiritual driving force behind MEND assembled a heavily fortified and highly sophisticated quasi-military complex in the creeks, where he offered arms training for local youths and gathered recruits for the struggle. By 2005, his camps housed a combined militia force of 3,000 armed youths, who efficiently ran his bunkering operations (Asuni, 2009, p.12). The operational tactics of the group of adduction and disruption of oil production shocked the international community between 2004 and 2006, and threatened the Nigerian-state and oil production giants with its almost successful disruption of oil mining and export to a near zero percent. The group demonstrated increased sophistication in weaponry (Fisher-Thompson, 2007).

However, disturbed by the horror of arms proliferation and associated violence in the region and its impact on Nigeria's economy, former President, Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, proclaimed the Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) on June 25, 2009 to grant state pardon to militants. The Amnesty Programme led to the award of humongous pipeline surveillance contracts to ex-militants like Tom Polo, Ateke, Asari, etc, who pretended to have surrendered their arms. The collapse of the programme and

the resurgence of arms proliferation fractured the militia groups and caused the rise of a plethora of armed groups like the Niger Delta Avengers, the Red Scorpions, among others, and the transformation of surveillance contractors to big time illegal bunkerers and arms traffickers to maintain and secure bunkering turf and the successful execution of the lucrative surveillance jobs (Duquet, 2009, p.175; Okorie, 2018, p.60).

Conclusion

Illicit arms proliferation has been a nuisance and a critical challenge to good governance and development in the Niger Delta in recent times. The ease of availability has escalated social upheavals in the region. In fact, arms acquisition and usage has almost become a normal way of life in the region as both state and non-state actors are all involved in illicit arms trafficking. The acquisition of firearms by oil companies to secure their pipelines, local politicians to achieve electoral success, communities to arm ethnic militias and vigilante groups and the frequent cult clashes leave in their trails tears, sorrows and blood. The dynamics of firearms accumulation in the Niger Delta is accelerated by the porous nation's borders on land and along the coast. Arms are also acquired through local manufactures and compromised security agents who steal from government arms depots. To curb this ugly trend, the state must secure the confidence and goodwill of community leaders across the land and democratize its security architecture by imbibing community policing to reduce the incidences of privatization of security outfits, the flow of small arms and curtail the internal mechanism that facilitates its acquisition and accumulation in the first place.

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