Assessment of the Rivers State Governor Chibuike Amnesty and Disarmament Programme under the Administration, Rotimi Amaechi 2007-2015

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Abstract

This study is an assessment of the Rivers State Amnesty and Disarmament Programme. The study took an overview of the Rivers State amnesty programme 2007-2015, assessing its achievements and exploring its lacunas. The study adopted the Amnesty International Theory of change. To fully achieve the objective of the study, three research questions were posed, including identifying the aims of the Rt. Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi's administration for initiating the amnesty and disarmament programme and to identify the pitfalls and gaps in the implementation of the programme in Rivers State. Two concepts were reviewed including the concept of amnesty on the one hand and militancy and arms proliferation on the other hand. Data presentation focused on the outcome of post amnesty programme which was said to be fairly successfully given its impact on the reduction of small arms and light weapons in circulation in the state leading also to the reduction in crime rate and increase in oil production within the period under study. The study having identified the pitfalls of the programme concluded that despite the resurgence of criminal activities in the State after the exit of the Amaechi's

administration, the State Amnesty Programme was a success to the extent that pipeline vandalism, kidnapping and other forms of social vices were brought under control. To this end it was recommended that, all criminal elements must be treated as criminal and not pampered to serve as a deterrence to others.

Key words: Demobilization, Disarmament, Amnesty, Reintegration and Amnesty Programme.

Background to the Study

The proliferations of small arms and light weapons occasioned by militancy activities in Rivers State had in more ways than one undermined the socio-economic development of Rivers State prior to the coming of the Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi's administration 2007-2015.

The militant activities in the State during this era which had seemingly spiraled out of the control of the security agencies, with such increscent crimes like kidnapping, cultism, political assassinations, hostage taking, electoral violence and thuggery was the handiworks of some groups based in the Niger Delta having a network of followers e.g Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) Niger Delta Strike Force, the Outlaws etc with the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) as the umbrella body exacerbating a sieged State.

The gross ineffectiveness of security agencies to rein in the culprits and mitigate the rising profile of the state as kidnappers and criminals "heaven" necessitated the need to proffer and apply a political solution culminating in the demobilization, disbarment and reintegration into the society of the culprits otherwise known as the Amnesty Programme. The implementation of the amnesty and disarmament programme by the then Rivers State Government was seen as a necessary condition for reviving the socio-economic condition of the State, bringing about stability to both the economic, social and political sphere and sustain peace.

Rivers State according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2015) has a population of over seven (7) million resident, which is equivalent to four (4%) percent of the

total population of the entire country, therefore making the staff strength of the police force in the state at that same period which is placed at fifteen thousand five hundred (15,500) grossly inadequate for the protection of lives and property. This is made worse by the rate of poverty and unemployment prevalent in a society which has made crime, especially kidnapping, pipeline vandalism and bunkering more alluring as a quicker source of money and escaping poverty, necessitating the steps so far taken by the Rivers State Government in granting amnesty to the participators of violent crime in the State, though minimally able to control the spiraling security situation in the State by reducing the rate of arm proliferation and violence.

This study therefore wish to explore and analyze the gaps inherent in the implementation of the State Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) (Amnesty Programme) of the combatants as an essential prerequisites for maintaining post conflict stability.

Statement of the Problem

The dynamics of human nature has made it very impossible to envisage a conflict free society. Political economic diversity of the human society also means that negative societal issues are evenly spread across all society with equal uniqueness. The return to democracy in 1999 was seen as an avenue by most youths of the Niger Delta region to seek redress for the long years of neglect by the Federal Government and the rippling of resources from the region to build the Federal Capital Territory and other States of the federation. The involvements of the youths in elections as political thugs and the free use and movement of small weapons and light arms used during the elections gave the youths impetus for a self-survival struggles against the authorities.

The inability of the politicians to completely retrieve the arms from the youth and the inadequacy of the flow of fund from the politicians, had turned these youths into loose cannons.

Despite the laudable outcome of the Rivers State amnesty programme, under the administration of Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi, cult related activities,

kidnapping for ransom, pipe line vandalism and illegal oil bunkering, social vices and criminalities still pervade the length and breath of the state.

This study therefore is to assess the Rivers State amnesty/disarmament programme exploring the lacuna and the achievements recorded as a result of the implementations of the amnesty programme.

Research Questions

The following research question is meant to guide this study.

i. What was the aim of Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi administrations disarmament and amnesty programme in Rivers State?
ii. Are there identifiable pitfalls and gaps in the implementation of the Rivers State amnesty and disarmament programme?
iii. Were the aims of the Rivers State amnesty programmes achieved?

Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to assess the Rivers State Government Amnesty Programme under the Hon. Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi's administration 2007-2015. The specific objectives are:

i. Identify the aim of Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi led administration is sponsoring an amnesty/disarmament programme.
ii. Ascertain if the aim of the State government for sponsoring the programmes were attained.
iii. Identify the short coming and pitfalls of the amnesty programme.

Significance of the Study

The magnitude of security related issues that bedeviled the entire Niger Delta region and Rivers State in particular was a source of concern to the government, critical stakeholders and resident of the state alike.

Therefore the state Government Amnesty Programme was a welcome relief to all concerned. This study therefore is adjudged to be significant to the extent that it will bring to the fore the impact of the disarmament and amnesty programme on security, peace and improved socio-economic and political well bearing of the people in the State.

Secondly, the finding shall guide policy makers on the implementation of security related programmes in the future, especially when it has to do with the control of arms proliferations and criminal activities. Finally, the importance of the study is anchored on its ability to provide the reading public will literature on the subject area.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Concept of Amnesty

Encyclopedia Britannica defined common law definition of amnesty as sovereign act of oblivion or forgetfulness of the past acts, granted by a government of individual or individuals who have committed criminal offenses. Such action of offering amnesty is usually conditional and is based on the fact that, the recipient of the amnesty will go back to a place of obedience. Amnesty is commonly offered to the crimes that are of political nature and committed against the state such as treason, sedition or rebellion. Normally, it is a Legislative, Constitutional or Statutory Act of the Supreme Power of the State (Diri and Jaja 2020).

The reduction of the volume of oil production and the associated economic impact in the drastic manner were the key factors that made the Federal Government of the day consider extending amnesty to the Niger Delta militants even though they had engaged in crimes against humanity that were really serious. It was on this basis that Kuku (2015) has indicated that the major goals of the amnesty programme is to stabilize, consolidate and sustain security in the Niger Delta as the precondition of economic development in the region and in the nation at large. Ebiede (2020) notes that the Nigerian Demobilization, Disarmament and Reintegration Programme received many applauses as it is both built and carried out by local stakeholders (Kuku, 2012, Obi, 2014). Other researchers Ebiede (2020) have commented negatively on externally developed peacebuilding programme on the basis that in most cases, such a programme does not focus on the question of working with local communities, and consequently does not take into account the peculiarities and specificities that are important to promote peacebuilding processes in conflict societies. In further justification of the need of having a home grown disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, Rechmond (2010) reasoned that the peacebuilding initiatives which are spearheaded by the International community are normally influenced by the externally defined

criteria of best practices which in most cases differ greatly with the local understanding of how peacebuilding initiatives should proceed and thus may not necessarily accomplish the intended goals. In this regard, Deconing, (2013) Leonardson and Rudd (2015) recommends that peacebuilding programmes ought to be designed and implemented according to the local need. They have strongly criticized the process of adopting the western models of policy making instead a more localized approach towards peace building in terms of the process of national ownership should be adopted (MacGinty, 2010).

The reason why there was need of amnesty and disarmament was due to the proliferations of the small arms and the light weapons in Nigeria particularly the Niger Delta. In the case of the United Nations between 2008-2020, the small arms are the most common devices to continue the crime violence. It is due to the fact that this weapon is affordable to purchase, it is lightweight, easy to use, can be found everywhere, concealed, and transported. The security threat that has been experienced in the last twenty (2) decades as surmised by Nwokueze and Okolie-Osemene, (2017) due to the ill acculation of light weapons and small arms.

During 2003 and 2007 Rivers State became the epicentre of militancy. Free movement and possession of fire arms prompted the need to have the Disarmament programme of the State Government, which is a follow up of the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (Amnesty) Programme of the President Yaadua.

The concept of disarmament which is a critical component of the modern post conflict peace building processes is termed as the intentional withdrawal or decrease of military influence and equipment out of circailation and the concept of disarmament is highly aligned to the core mandate of the United Nations. This is due to the fear that the amount of arm build up in the world and the amount of money spent on weapons in the world has been a menace to the human life on the earth.

Arms control by States, and disarmament is concerned with accounting, controlling and the elimination of weapons as one of the most important features of a safer world to habilitate man. The official guide to the X-rays (P& Det, 2018).

It has been claimed that successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of excombatants is a significant element and a precondition to the sustenance or maintenance of post-conflict stability and promotion of real prospect of sustainable peace (Maggah and ODonnel, 2018) Paes (2005). Thus, the role of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of exmillitants is indispensable in most post conflict peace building and reconstruction activities in the contemporary world, though it is not obvious how much these disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes have helped to promote peace and stability in the post conflict nations and what influences their success or failure (Ebiede, 2020).

The appropriateness of the disarmament programme of the President, Yar Adua as a local programme that reflects the local realities of the Nigeria State was well summed by Ebiede (2020) in the following words:

I am glad we have the Nigerian way, or we would be seeing the tariff of the donor agencies and the external funder at the reintegration stage of the other DDR programmes.They demand that the local people be engaged in whatever they termed as national ownership, but no matter how good it was, President Umaru Musa, Yar Adua conceptualized the programme by Nigerian, run by Nigerians, articulated and financed one hundred percent by Nigerians, and he even went ahead to appoint people of the Niger Delta region to spearhead it (p.2).

Speaking further on the localization of the disarmament programme, Ukiwo (2015) observed that, whereas the umbrella body of all the militant groups in the Niger Delta region, MEND, made calls on the inclusion of the international organizations and especially on the inclusion of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which has abinitio offered to help Nigeria in the design and implementation of the disarmament, and amnesty programme. But the Presidential Amnesty Committee was formed in which international organization were not involved and successful negotiation with the armed groups were achieved. (Molloy, 2011).

According to Krught and Ozerdem, (2004), the Nigerian Presidential amnesty programme was formulated to demobilize, rehabilitate and then reintegrate the

ex-militant, who had accepted the amnesty and voluntarily disarmed and surrendered their weapons, arms and ammunitions to the authorities in exchange of the granting of State pardon by the President of the Federal Republic.

Concept of Militancy and Arms Proliferation

The concept of militancy as explained by Chindah and Braide (2000) is a state of condition of being fighting or inclined to fight in the name of a course or belief. It is also a violent action of an individual, a group or a sect within a region, a community or a state in the pursuit of the claims of underdevelopment, political oppression or marginalization.

Militancy is a word which has its origin in the Latin word which means to be a soldier that is, militare. It is also the sense of active aggression to support a cause. The American Heritage dictionary (2019) described a militant as somebody with a fighting nature, ferocious, particularly in the name of a cause. The Merriam Webster Dictionary (2019) was able to put in the definition of a militant as, having or showing the desire or willingness to use strong, extreme and sometimes forceful means to attain something.

In their effort to seek some justification to militancy, Ashimolowo and Odiachi (2012) proposed that what individuals seeking their rights and fail to obtain it through negotiations do is to simplify the process and resort back to using violence against the people in authority who are perceived to have power and in the process, form an organized group, similar to that of a regular army (Hornby, 2009).

In the definition of militancy, Ajibola etal (2014) concurred with the stand taken by Chindah and Braide (2000) of what militancy is, which is the activities of a single person, groups or parties who are practicing violence or demonstrating violence normally in response to a cause of religion, political, ideological, economic or social. To further reduce the definition into a local peculiarity of Rivers State, the three concurred with the view that militancy in River State was rather political than economic, but ideology-wise, the agitation of the Niger Delta to take control of its resources is on the same line. Although most people view the Niger Delta struggle as economical as opposed to political.

Their overall problem on militancy had been a sequel to the many years of political marginalization, lack of economic resources, political Subjugation, suppression and victimization which has resulted into limitless poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, environment degradation, health challenges and lack of desire to develop the region.

The years of oppression against the youths through the employment and use of police brutality and the feeling of general insecurity in the Niger delta area led to the violent militant aggression in the area. On a different dimension, the use of these youths as political thugs to scare the political opponents and the unbreddle desire to win elections at all cost against the will of the electorate became the fountain of empowerment with aims, weapons and the encouragement of the youths. This is to the extent that 51 percent of the local residents report having heard of the project (Nweke and Etido-Inyang, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The amnesty International Theory of change for people affected by conflict (2006), explain how a set of action will lead to a desired change in a context. The theory which was put forward by Amnesty International 2016 is focused on how to generate peace and less violence conflict in a specific context. It draws it strength from analyzing conflicts and conflicting situations, the theory is important for programming in conflict affected area because it helps to improve the design, maintaining and evaluation of conflict reduction programmes.

The theory is easily adapted to the unique challenges, opportunities and dynamics of each situation, it can be assessed during the formative evaluations, aimed to determine if the project or programme is on the right track towards achieving its stated goals.

Data Presentation Analysis

Outcome of the Post Amnesty Programme in Rivers State

The Disarmament and Amnesty Programme was an initiation of the Federal Government under the President Yar' Adua's administration. The Presidential Amnesty Programme was designed to demobilize, rehabilitate and subsequently reintegrate the hitherto Niger Delta militants into the society.

The implementation of the reintegration process began with the registration, camping and collation of essential information for a period between twenty five (25) to fifty two (52) weeks at different locations variously harvesting of information on the background and history of each ex-militant, this camping period was also used to debrief, counsel and prepare the ex-agitators for transition and reintegration into civil life (NAP, 2009). While the first phase of the programme lasted, each documented agitator was entitled to a monthly stipend of sixty five thousand naira (₦65,000) only. This payment however continued even after the camping phase had elapsed. The success of this Presidential Amnesty Programme spured the then Governor of Rivers State Hon. Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi to also initiate a disarmament and demobilization programme in the State to mop up the remnant of militant agitators who were yet to sign up for the Presidential Amnesty Programme.

Nweke and Etido-Inyang (2018) identified phases of militant activities in Rivers State during the Amaechi's administration. The first phase they noted was from 2007-2011, while the second phase was from 2011-2015. What it means therefore is that, the administration of Hon. Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi as Governor of Rivers was characterized by militant activities with all its attendant economic and social consequences. To ameliorate this consequences therefore, the administration initiated the State Amnesty Programme which was able to register six thousand, nine hundred and ninety seven 96,997) participant, out of the total twenty thousand, one hundred and ninety two (20,192) across the nine (9) states of the Niger Delta regions.

The now reprentant militants surrendered to the authorities, eighty two thousand, four hundred and six (82,406) rounds of live amunitions and one thousand and nine (1009) weapons out of the total two hundred and eighty seven thousand, four hundred and forty five ammunition and two thousand, seven hundred and sixty (2,760) weapons surrendered across the region (CASS Report, 2011).

The outcome of the amnesty programme in Rivers State had some far reaching behavioural changes on the part of the repentant militants and could be adjudged to have to a great extent achieved its desired goal.

Prior to the amnesty programme, the activities of the militants including the demand for resource control had grossly affected the production of crude petroleum in the state being one of major oil producing State in the federation. The lack of or reduced investment in both the upstream and downstream of the petroleum sector also had, had a spiral effect on the economy of the country which rely mostly on the production and sales of crude petroleum as the main source of foreign exchange.

The amnesty programme therefore became an emergency action to save the Nigerian economy from total collapse, predicated on the residyness of the militants to willingly surrender and accept the amnesty by renouncing all forms of militancy. With the help of Governor Amaechi and his assurances to the militants that the Federal Government will abide by her pledge and commitments to the programme, one of the immediate "visible" outcome of the amnesty programme was the reduction in the number of small arms and light weapons in circulation in the state. The consequential outcome of this reduction was the reduction also in crime and criminality in the state. The reduction in kidnapping, hostages of expatriate oil workers, pipe line vandalisation became instrumental to the increased production of crude petroleum and scale up on oil revenue. This was inspite of the fact that the Wike administration which took over from Amaechi Instituted in 2016 its own amnesty programme, with Sir Ken Chinda as the Chairman with the express mandate to ensure the restoration of peace and security in the State (Azubuike, 2017).

Iheamnachor & Tafughorhi (2018) noted regrettably that two years after the conclusion of the programme cultist and militants who had earlier renounced criminality and were pardoned through the amnesty programme once again, kidnapping and molesting people and motorist in the state, returing the State back to the dark days of unpresidented criminal activities pre-2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme.

Reason for the Rivers State Amnesty Programme

The level of criminality witnessed in the State during the dark days of militancy was unprecedented. This has began to impact negatively on the economy of the State, while also portraying the State in bad light amongst the committee of States

as a criminal heaven. For example during the period before the amnesty programme the kidnapping of expatriate oil workers had grossly affected overall crude oil production output, many oil workers had withdrawn their services, consequently, the economy of not only the State but that of the entire country which is based on the production and sales of crude petroleum products were beginning to nose dive.

To rescue the economy and avert any catastrophic socio-economic consequences that may likely follow, the State government had to indulged in the amnesty programme as a means of salvaging the situation. Ebiede (2020) noted that between the year 2011-2015 following the amnesty programme, there were zero militant attack on oil facilities around the Niger Delta region, and that the daily oil production was averaging over two million (2m) barrels per-day within the period.

This was also complemented by drastic drop in the other forms of criminal activities within the state. Port Harcourt and its suburbs that used to be flash points for cult related activities, became calm and more habitable. However, fifty one (51) militant attacks were recorded in 2016 (Ebiede, 2020) as a fall out of the 2015 election which Nweke and Etido-Inyang (2018) blamed on the fresh recruitments of cultist across the state. In the quest for election victory. This is because, most of the registered ex-militant found it difficult to fully integrate into the society given the inadequacy of the financial rewards, therefore they found themselves returning back to the creeks though not as armed militants but rather as pipe line vandals and illegal refinery (Kpofire) operators.

Secondly, some hitherto non militants for the reason of the monetary rewards attached to the amnesty programme as stipends registered as militant under the amnesty programme, thereby denying other genuine militants access for registering in the programme and further over blotting the already over stretched expenditures of the government.

In the third place is the issue of inadequacy of the training given the participants of the amnesty programme. Most of those who registered for the programme did so at the bihiest of their hitherto leaders in the militancy arrangement not out of

their own volution. Therefore most of the participant were never serious with the training programme, and so failed to get adequate skills that is capable of supporting them after the programme.

Finally, the actual militant leaders despite ab-initio agreeing to lay down their arms never participated in the amnesty training programme either within or outside the country. The implication therefore is that, without any life skill after repudiating militancy, these leaders pilfers the stipends of their followers and others quickly recourse to illegal oil bunkering activities.

Pitfalls of the Rivers State Government Amnesty Programme

Monetization of the Reintegration Process

The Federal Government of Nigeria made financial rewards one of the cardinal focus of the reintegration process. This has overtly affected the overall performance of the programme also having a significant impact on the economy of Nigeria as more oil was made available for exchange in the international market. This was largely due to the improvement in the security of oil worker and oil installations. The meaningful engagement of the hitherto criminal master minds and the depleption of instruments of violence from circulation was a high score for the amnesty programme. Another very important outcome of the amnesty programme, was the cumulative improvement in human capacity development in the state. As part of the programme, many of the beneficiaries were engaged in various vocation and formal education in both Nigeria and outside the country, this has properly equipped the ex-militants with the necessary skill and capabilities that can make them have competitive edge in many area of human endevour which will make it easier for them to reintegrate in the social community.

Ebiede, (2019) noted that, as at October 2018, fifteen thousand four hundred and fifty nine (15,459) ex-militatnts have successfully under gone vocational training in the following fields; Marine technology, heavy duty operations, welding, electrical installations, Aviation (Pilot and Engineering) Boat building etc. As is the case with most disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, information are usually scanty in many areas, thus case of Nigeria isn't different, therefore

Conclusion

The amnesty programme may have gone a long way in the reduction of criminality in the Niger Delta region and increased oil production and revenue. However, the programme failed completely in addressing the Niger Delta issues which was predicated on resource control.

The amnesty programme to many is more of rewarding criminality at the expense of law abiding citizens. The amnesty programme points to the fact that until one indulges in criminal activities, owing arms and ammunition, despite the glaring economic condition of the people, the government will never act to rescue the situation.

While the seemingly insecure society that pervades the landscape the entire region is deemed beneficial to the political elites (Nweke and Etido-Inyang 2018). That the political elites tactically continues to retain some militant element for the purposes of prosecution elections. The study therefore concluded that, so long as there are rewards for militancy and criminality in Nigeria in the form of "Amnesty Programme", criminal activities will continue to thrive as the criminal element will keep reproducing itself.

Recommendations

1. To permanently avoid the quagmire of economic downturn as a result of the disruption of oil prospecting and production activities, the government should deliberately get involved in the development of the oil bearing areas of the country.
2. That criminal element must be treated as such to stop other from indulging in criminal activities.
3. That the Federal Government must, as a matter of agency, discontinue the amnesty programme especially the payment of stipends to the participants and channel those resources to the development of the Niger Delta region.

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