

Oil Extraction in Ogoniland: Preventing a Resurgence of Violence

Conflict Briefing: April 2019



Oil extraction and production has been a key driver of conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region has occasionally erupted in violent protests against oil companies over issues relating to community development, compensation for damage caused by oil spills and other oil-related environmental hazards. These agitations and protests sometimes spark violence and elicit an escalated response from public security forces.

Since the 1990s, oil companies in the Niger Delta have faced disruptions to their businesses by aggrieved individuals and communities. Between 1990 and 1994, there were prolonged disruptions to oil production in the region as a result of communal uprisings, notably in Ogoni where Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) was eventually forced to shut down its operations in 1993. Although oilfields and installations in Ogoniland have largely remained dormant since then, the environmental damage done to the area have remained an issue of contention between the communities, oil companies and the Federal Government.

In 2006, the Federal Government of Nigeria commissioned the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of Ogoni. In 2011, UNEP

submitted the report of the assessment. The report informed a large-scale government clean-up of the polluted area. A government agency, the Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HYPREP), was established to drive the remediation process. Delay in the clean-up exercise has however generated local tensions in the area. Plans by the Federal Government to resume oil production in Oil Mining Lease (OML 11) in Ogoni has further elevated local tensions and increased the risk of conflict in the area. In March 2019, the Federal Government reportedly ordered the transfer of the operatorship of OML 11 from SPDC to the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) to resume oil extraction in the area.

Community leaders, environmental and human rights activists in the region have vowed to resist the planned resumption of oil production in the area until the clean-up project is completed. There are also complaints that some other

grievances that fueled the earlier uprising that led to the cessation of oil extraction in OML 11, have remained largely un-addressed. These pending grievances and other emerging issues may spark off violent conflict in Ogoni. A resurgence of oil-related conflict could undermine security and economic viability in Ogoni and the entire Niger Delta region.

The following conflict briefing highlights the key conflict issues around OML 11 in Ogoni, identifies the interrelated dynamics of conflict, and proposes concrete steps for consideration by the government, civil society organizations and other key stakeholders to prevent a resurgence of violence in the area. An understanding of the emerging dynamics of conflict and the interrelated drivers will allow stakeholders to proactively address emerging conflict risk and violence in Ogoniland. This brief draws on data available on the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/peace-building-map).

Figure 1: Heatmap of Lethal Conflict around OML 11 in Rivers State (2009 - 2018)

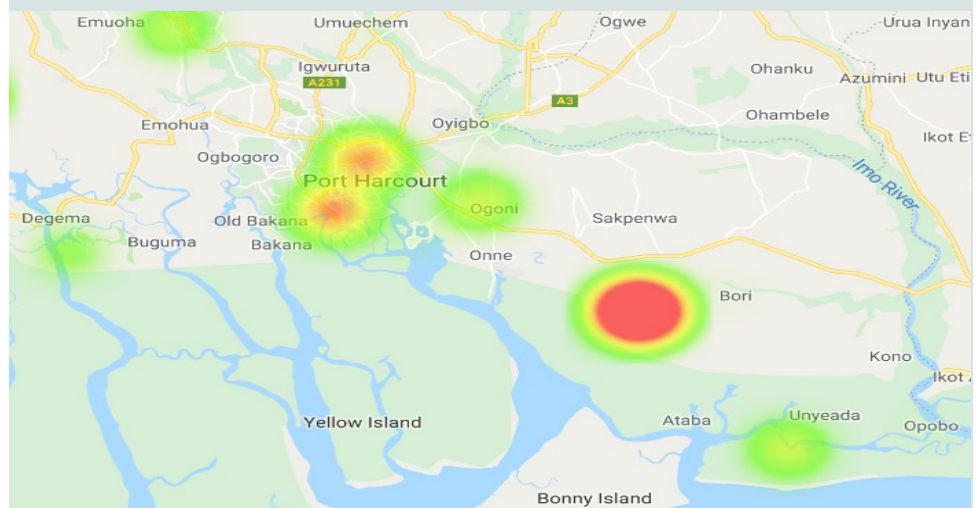


Figure 1: Heatmap shows concentration of conflict fatalities in Bori, Khana LGA in Ogoniland from 2009 - 2018. Sources: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/)

OML 11 and the Ogoni Crisis

The Oil Mining Lease (OML 11) is located in the southeastern part of the Niger Delta. It is one of the largest onshore oil blocks in Nigeria, comprising 33 oil and gas fields. It straddles several oil fields and facilities from Ogoni to Port Harcourt and Bonny. In addition to the 33 oil fields, OML 11 comprises the Bonny Terminal, the Afam VI Power Plant, the Okoloma Integrated Oil and Gas Plant, and the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) company in Bonny. These terminals are supplied with oil and gas from onshore and offshore fields all over the Niger Delta.

Ogoniland lies in the central part of OML 11 which comprises about 30% of the oil block. Although oil production has been stopped in the block since 1993, Ogoni is still a transit route for a major pipeline that transport crude from all parts of the Niger Delta. High density flowlines and trunk-lines crisscross the oil block. OML 11 contributes substantial volume of gas to the NLNG from the Bonny field in the southern part of the block. The SPDC-operated Afam VI gas-fired power plant is also supplied gas through the Afam field in the northern part of OML 11.

After many years of campaign against oil extraction, some community leaders and other stakeholders began to call for the resumption of oil production in Ogoniland. In 2015, an indigenous oil firm, Belema Oil, was endorsed by some Ogoni community leaders to start oil extraction from OML 11. MOSOP and some civil society groups rejected the endorsement of the indigenous oil firm. In 2018, another indigenous oil company, RoboMichael, was endorsed by some Ogoni traditional rulers. The endorsement triggered fresh crisis in Ogoniland.

In March 2019, the Federal Government ordered the transfer of the operatorship of OML 11 from SPDC to the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) to resume oil extraction in the area. The announcement has escalated local

Figure 2: Reported Incidents and Fatalities in Ogoni (2009 - 2018)

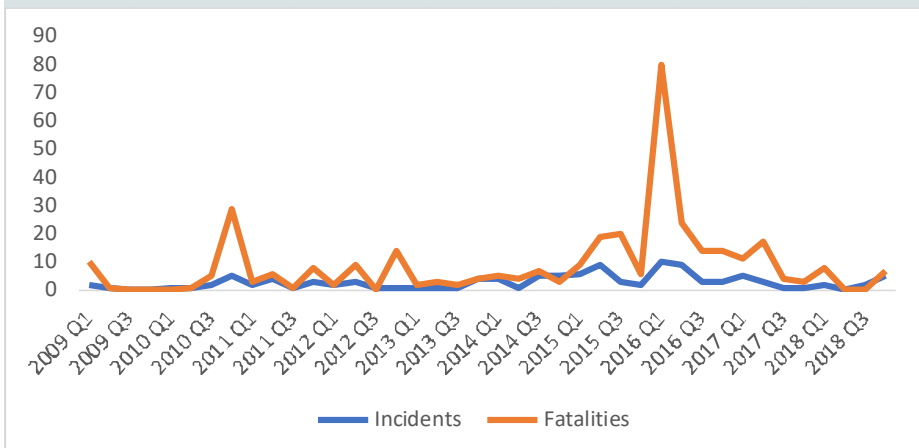


Figure 2: Reported Incidents and Fatalities in Ogoni from 2009 - 2018
Sources: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org)

Background

Ogoni is an ethnic nationality located in Rivers State in the southeast of the Niger Delta basin, and covering some 1,000 km². The area is traditionally made up of six kingdoms: Babbe, Eleme, Tai, Gokana, Ken-khana, and Nyo-Khana. The area is comprised of 226 communities and divided administratively into four local government areas (LGAs): Khana, Gokana, Tai, and Eleme. The area is one of the most densely populated regions in Nigeria. Though there has been no official census carried out in Ogoni since 2006, in several assessments conducted by the World Bank and other research institutions, the area is estimated to currently have a population of over 1 million. Fishing and farming are the predominant occupation of the inhabitants. The area is currently massively degraded as a result of pollution caused by decades of oil extraction.

In the 1990s, the Ogoni people organized themselves through the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) to protest against the Federal Government and oil companies operating in the area, over environmental pollution and human rights issues. In October 1990, MOSOP presented the *Ogoni Bill of Rights* to the

Federal Government and other key stakeholders.

The *Ogoni Bill of Rights* outlined the demands of the Ogoni people for environmental, social and economic justice. The campaign by the Ogoni people against SPDC and the Federal Government over environmental damage resulted in the cessation of oil extraction in Ogoniland in 1993. The crisis generated by the Ogoni uprising resulted in widespread human rights violation by public security forces, and this culminated in the extra-judicial killing of Kenule Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activist by the military regime of General Sani Abacha in 1995. Since then the relations between the Ogoni people, SPDC and the Federal Government has remained strained.

In June 2016, the Federal Government launched the Ogoni Clean-Up Project, based on the recommendations of the UNEP Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report. Grievances over the implementation of the clean-up project and recent plans by the Federal Government to resume oil extraction in Ogoniland have resulted in increased tensions in the area. At the center of the emerging crisis is the Oil Mining Lease (OML 11), a vast oil block formally operated by SPDC and its joint venture partners in Ogoni.

tensions and increased the risk of renewed violence in the area.

Overlapping Conflict Drivers: Past and Present

The resurgence of conflict risk and violence in Ogoniland since 2015 can be situated within the context of several interrelated and often overlapping conflict drivers and dynamics. The emerging conflict dynamics is driven by varying degrees of interrelated criminal, communal, environmental, historical and political factors.

Communal grievance over environmental pollution and neglect by the Federal Government and oil companies operating in area has been an underlying driver of conflict in Ogoni. The struggles for economic and environmental justice pioneered by MOSOP has evolved a culture of activism and resistance in Ogoniland. The Ogoni people still feel agonized by the human rights abuses they suffered as a result of repressive tactics of the Federal Government in the 1990s. This persisting grievance is manifest in the refusal of the Ogoni people to allow the resumption of oil exploitation in the area.

Criminality is also a key driver of violent conflict in Ogoni. The degradation of the environment has caused the destruction of the major means of livelihoods of the people, and this has led many of them to engage in criminal activities including oil bunkering and kidnaping for ransom. Organized criminality has resulted in the proliferation of arms and emergence of several cult groups in Ogoniland. Criminal and cult activities are funded with proceeds from oil bunkering business, locally known as *Kpofire*. Oil bunkering is a key driver of supremacy battles between rival cult groups and criminal gangs, as well as clashes between gangs and public security forces.

Politics is also a major driver of criminal and cult violence in Ogoniland. Criminality and cult violence tends to intensify during election cycles in Ogoni. Many cult groups and organized criminal gangs depend on the patronage of political elites, who either hire them as informal security or use them to attack or kill their opponents. Politically motivated violence is also a driver of supremacy battles among the numerous rival cult groups, in a bid to attract the patronage of the political elites. In March 2016, for instance, over 40 people were reportedly killed by political thugs during a

re-run election in Tai LGA. It is believed that the stronger and better armed the gang, the higher its chances being hired by the political elites.

Another key driver of conflict at the community level in Ogoniland is the struggle for influence and relevance among community leaders. Due to frequent chieftaincy tussles and intra-communal conflicts in Ogoni, community rulers and chiefs often align themselves with armed groups to retain power, funneling money and weapons into these groups and making them increasingly predatory. A loss of political power by a community leader also triggers violent conflict, as some of these armed groups seek to resist removal of their patrons. In addition, division or fusion of armed gangs and cult groups, especially when they are linked to traditional leaders or political elites, often escalates violent conflict.

These conflict drivers are often galvanized by trigger events which are usually associated with politics at the state and community levels, struggle for influence and competition for access to oil wealth. Communal tension has been elevated in Ogoni since the Federal Government reportedly ordered the resumption of oil

Figure 3: Dynamics of Lethal Conflict in Ogoniland (2009 - 2018)

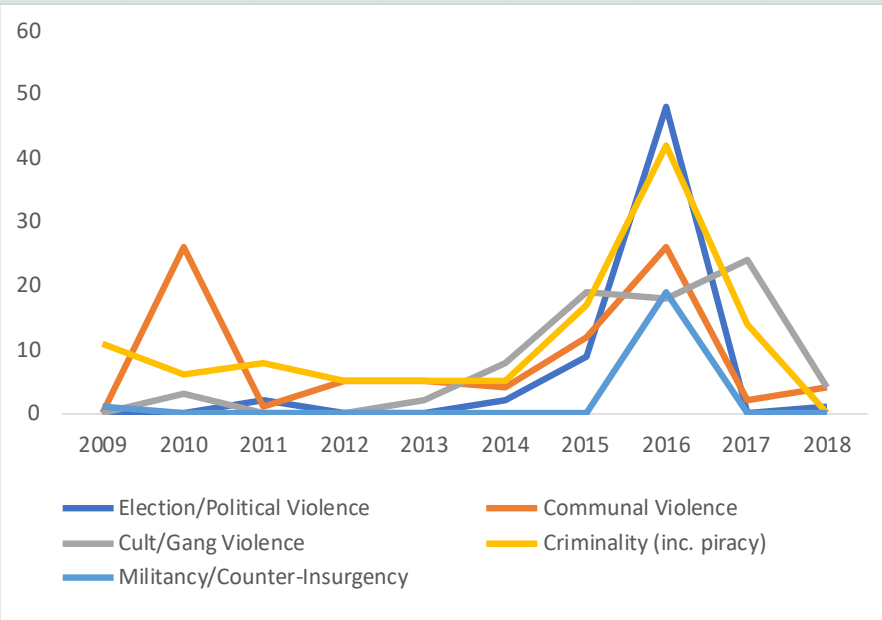


Figure 3: Conflict Trends and Dynamics in Ogoniland (Eleme, Gokana, Khana & Tai LGAs), 2009 - 2018. Sources: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data, integrated on the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/)

Figure 4: Conflict Drivers by LGA (2009 - 2018)

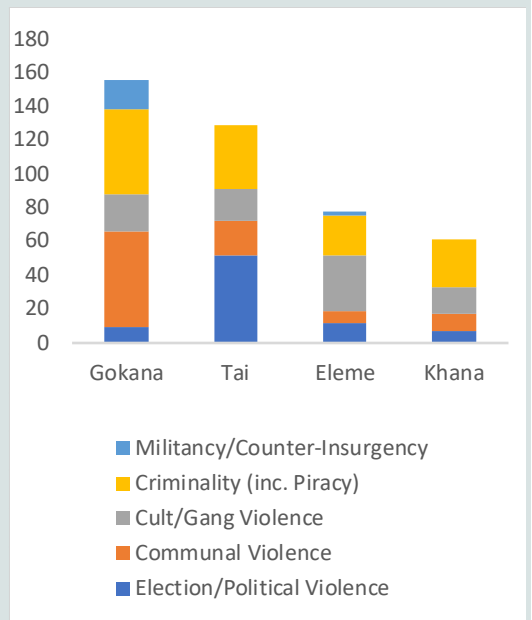


Figure 4: Conflict Drivers in Ogoni by LGA, 2009 - 2018. Sources: Nigeria Watch and ACLED data from the P4P Peace Map (www.p4p-nigerdelta.org/)

extraction in OML 11. Community leaders and criminal gangs are reportedly scheming and positioning themselves ahead of the planned resumption of oil production in the area.

Implications

The resumption of oil exploitation in OML 11, without consultation with the local communities, can exacerbate existing grievances against the Federal Government which can trigger violent conflict in Ogoni. The more oil is extracted, the more the magnitude of environmental degradation and pollution, and more protests. Communal grievances against the government and oil production activities can snowball into violent protest that can spark off repressive response from public security forces.

The struggle for environmental justice in Ogoni has resulted in the emergence of a campaign to leave oil under the soil. The campaign to leave oil underground has created awareness among the local people about the need to resist oil extraction in Ogoni due to its environmental impact. The resumption of oil extraction can cause the resurgence of violent activism in Ogoni. In August 2017, for example, there was a mass protest against SPDC over an alleged plan to resume oil production in Ogoni following the laying of pipelines in Gokana LGA.

Key stakeholders in Ogoni, including MOSOP, see the resumption of oil exploitation as a way of continuing the repression of the Ogoni people by the Federal Government. MOSOP has therefore vowed to mobilize the Ogoni people to resist oil exploitation in the area. Resistance to oil production can escalate into violent protests which may generate conflict between the Ogoni people and public security forces who may use violent means to repress protests against oil exploitation in the area. In May 2016, for instance, there was a protest over the deployment of soldiers in Bori, the traditional headquarters of the Ogoni people, in Khana LGA.

The deployment of public security forces to safeguard oil production and critical facilities often results in violent clashes between security operatives, youth groups and criminal gangs including militants. In

February 2016, for instance, 18 people were reportedly killed during a clash between soldiers and supporters of an ex-militant leader in Gokana LGA. Clashes between security operatives and criminal gangs, especially those involved in illegal bunkering activities, can result in the proliferation of weapons, increase in organized criminality, and the emergence of an economy of violence in Ogoniland.

Given the existing tension caused by grievances over environmental pollution and the delay in the take-off of the clean-up project in Ogoniland, a resumption of oil extraction can escalate intra- and inter-communal conflicts in Ogoni. Many communities in Ogoni have been polarized in response to expectations of benefits from the clean-up project. Disagreement and internal divisions over the clean-up project is a reflection of an emergent oil politics in Ogoni, a situation that will likely escalate with the resumption of oil production in the area.

The resumption of oil production can galvanize the emerging oil politics in Ogoni. In the recent times, the emergence of two indigenous companies, Robo Michael and Belema Oil, reportedly polarized the youths and leaders in Ogoni, in a struggle for the operatorship of OML 11. The two companies reportedly sponsored some youth groups and some community leaders to support their bid to replace SPDC in Ogoni. In 2018, communal tension was elevated, following reports that some traditional leaders have endorsed one of the indigenous companies to resume oil exploitation in OML 11. Resumption of oil exploitation will most likely intensify communal polarization and escalate violent conflict.

The transfer of the operatorship of OML 11 and the planned resumption of oil exploitation by NPDC can affect funding for the clean-up project. The clean-up project is funded by Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and other multinational oil companies, including SPDC and its joint venture partners. OML 11 is owned as joint venture (JV) between NNPC with a 55% shareholding, and SPDC 30%, ENPL (a subsidiary of Total) 10%, and Agip (a subsidiary of ENI) with a 5% shareholding. Therefore, the transfer of the operatorship

of the oil block to NPDC, a subsidiary of NNPC, can cause the other multinational companies to withhold their counterpart funding for the clean-up project.

The Way Forward

Successful resumption of oil production in Ogoni requires a comprehensive approach to address existing and emerging grievances, and other overlapping issues that are fueling conflict in Ogoniland. To avoid a relapse to violence and to build durable peace there is need to urgently address issues involving the clean-up project, communal grievances, prevention of oil pollution, environmental remediation, and improvement of security and respect for human rights.

Any efforts to address the situation must involve engagement and consultation with key stakeholders and interest groups through a roundtable. Communities must be encouraged to dialogue internally and come up with a common platform to engage with the Federal Government and other key actors. The Rivers state government should demonstrate willingness to engage the Federal Government in dialogue for the interest of the Ogoni people.

There is also the need for a strategy to amplify the voices of a wide range of leaders and stakeholders across Ogoniland and weaken those that may seek to use violence for political and monetary gains. Any strategy to amplify the voices of peace actors in Ogoni must involve early engagement of key stakeholders and relevant interest groups.

A coalition of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), International NGOs and donor agencies should be formed to facilitate engagement and dialogue between key stakeholders. The coalition should develop an appropriate communication strategy to foster community dialogue and engagement, and communicate the decision to commence oil extraction and production activities in the region.

It is only by taking a proactive and holistic approach to address communal grievances and emerging conflict dynamics in Ogoniland that a repeat of the uprisings of

Contributors: Afeno Odomovo, Nkasi Wodu