

Warri Crisis Update, Delta State, March 20 - 26, 2003

Introduction

The nature of the conflict in Warri has become considerably more complex in the past week. For contextual information on this crisis please see the Idasa Special Report on Warri for the March 12 – 19th period. The current violence centers on two main sources of tension: a) an intra-communal dispute between the Itsekiri and Ijaw concerning control of the Warri South West local government headquarters and ward delineation and b) conflict between area youth and the military concerning the policing of communities and oil installations. Both areas of dispute also concern access to revenue from the oil industry through payments designated as oil company 'host communities'. It should be noted that the Warri area saw a protracted period of crisis in the late 1990s also revolving around ethnic representation and claims for economic and environmental reparations from the oil industry.

Major incidents of violence:

- 1) The recent February crisis between Urhobo and Itsekiri youth in Warri town was also related to the distribution of the electoral wards and perceptions of Itsekiri dominance.
- 2) Clash on March 14th between youth from Okerenkoko village and the military. Ijaw communities accused military of provoking hostilities through a premeditated attack upon them whereas the military accused the youth of planning to disrupt oil activities. The standoff at Okerenkoko has been linked to the protection of oil bunkering activities.
- 3) Burning of Itsekiri communities in Warri South West LGA. Arson was reportedly carried out by Ijaw youths according to some media sources and by the military according to others.
- 4) Evacuation of oil company staff and closing of oil installations in the area, particularly Shell and Chevron flowstations. The resulting loss of 30% of Nigerian oil production affects national revenue and international oil prices.
- 5) Military occupation of the town and the riverine area has substantially increased with the bringing in of additional troops, heavy military equipment and artillery. The Chief of the Nigerian Army was reportedly deployed to Warri on Tuesday. Centre for Constitutional Governance, a human rights organisation, reported that military excesses, including allegations of torture and summary executions have been committed - see press report [Thisday, Tuesday 26th March 2003, p.4] for the full story.
- 6) Approximately 60 civilians and 12 soldiers are reported dead. Itsekiri sources state that 20 communities have been razed by Ijaw youth, while Ijaw organizations state that 4 –6 of their communities have been razed by the military. As the naval waterways have been closed for close to two weeks it is difficult to verify this information. The number of displaced people is likely in the region of 5-6000 and some organizations in the area indicate that people have fled overland into neighbouring states.

Context of the Violence

Ijaw youth have targeted Itsekiri communities as a result of the distribution of electoral wards that favour the Itsekiri, considered a minority elite by the Ijaw. Revenge attacks against Ijaw communities have occurred. In response to the military crackdown, Ijaw groups have made a 21-day ultimatum to government agencies

(notably the NDDC) to meet with them regarding the underdevelopment of Ijaw communities. Threats to blow-up oil facilities have received considerable international press coverage, but have not formed part of locally reported official statements by key Ijaw leadership.

There is considerable potential for the conflict to spread to other areas. In terms of intra-communal violence these include Warri Town (renewing the February conflict between Urhobo and Itsekiri based on a similar claim of minority Itsekiri dominance of the electoral wards), as well as Rivers, Bayelsa and Lagos State.

This week's standoff between TotalFina Elf and youth in Rivers State contributes to tensions between youth, the military and the oil industry. These tensions were already high due to the murder of Marshall Harry and ongoing fuel shortages.

Lagos State has seen violence between Yoruba and Ijaw youth in the past, and a call by the pan-Yoruba organization Afenifere for solidarity with the Itsekiri (who pertain to the Yoruba) may have worrying implications for renewed violence between these groups.

This week Governor Ibori of Delta State linked the Warri-area violence to the arming of area youth to protect 'the trade' (illegal oil bunkering, widely believed to be carried out by elements of the security forces). His statement echoes a statement by CAN made the previous week.

Constructive Developments.

Ijaw leadership, including representatives of both the Federation of Niger Delta Ijaw Communities and the Ijaw Youth Council have condemned communal violence on both sides. They support efforts to resolve the crisis and call for a withdrawal of military force from the area.

Human Right NGOs from the region have assumed an important role in monitoring the situation and visiting affected areas. They are expressing their collective concern about the situation and the ramifications it may have on the region.

Recommendations

1. Ijaw and Itsekiri leadership have a key role to play in brokering an end to the violence in the communities and in opening discussions to resolve the dispute over electoral wards. The call to end the violence should be broadcast across the Delta region and into Lagos State as one step to prevent the spread of violence. This report herewith adds its support to the call on the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to immediately invite warring communities to a dialogue in an attempt to bring the stem the growing complexity of the conflict.
2. Given the number of displaced people and destruction of communities, it is necessary to coordinate a humanitarian response among the donor community to address the needs of the population displaced by the conflict. The donor community is encouraged to lobby government to declare the area a disaster area for relief to be brought in.
3. The media is called upon to carry out thorough investigative journalism. Contacts between local human rights organizations and the international press should be facilitated so as to prevent an exaggeration of the threats or the scapegoating of particular communities.
4. INEC should provide a forum at which concerns over the electoral process in the Warri area can be adequately addressed.