

TEST OF A LECTURE DELIVERED BY THE RIVERS STATE GOVERNOR, RT. HON. CHIBUIKE ROTIMI AMAECHI, AT THE "DISTINGUISHED PERSONALITY LECTURE" OF THE CENTRE FOR PEACE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, MONDAY, MARCH 23, 2009

THE NIGER DELTA: AN OVERVIEW

The Niger Delta is the largest wetland in Africa and third in the world. It is a geographical area measuring about 70,000sq km and lies in the Southernmost part of Nigeria, stretching from the Nigeria-Cameroun boundary in the east to the Ondo-Ogun State boundary in the west. The area is bounded in the North by Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Kogi and Ekiti States, with the Atlantic Coast forming the general boundary in the south. The whole area is traversed by a large number of rivers, streams, rivulets and creeks, and consists of a number of ecological zones, sandy costal ridge barrier, brackish or saline mangroves freshwater, permanent and seasonal swamp forests and lowland rain forests.

The classical description of the Niger Delta is restricted to a few states in the South-South geo-political zone which possess varying degrees of deltaic features as described above, namely, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, and Akwa Ibom States. But today, the Niger Delta is broadly viewed to comprise "about 16, ODD communities in the nine oil producing states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers, with more than 20 million people". The major occupation of the people of the area is farming and fishing, which the tropical climate, rain forest, the numerous rivers and creeks encourage. For generations, the rich flora and fauna of the area have been the primary source of livelihood for the people.

Briefly, on my primary constituency, Rivers State, the name Rivers, aptly defines a State with five major rivers. It has over three hundred creeks, rivulets and tributaries all emptying into the Atlantic Ocean. The State is bounded on the South by the Atlantic Ocean, on the North by Imo and Abia States, to the East by Akwa Ibom State and to the West by Bayelsa and Delta States. The State is home to the Oil and Gas industry, the mainstay of Nigeria's economy. This industry has huge strategic infrastructure spread across the lands and especially the swamp (riverine) areas of the State.

NIGER DELTA CRISIS: WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT

What is today known as the Niger Delta crisis is a culmination and expression of pent up anger and frustration by a people from whose lands and Rivers the bulk of the nations revenue is exhumed in the form of oil and gas, which translates to billions of petro-dollars yearly, but with the people of the area left in squalor, neglect, abject poverty and in a general state of underdevelopment.

Successive administrations have either paid lip Service to turning the situation around or done too little to register meaningful impact. It is this prevalent State of affairs that stimulated genuine demands for a redress, which later developed from peaceful to violent agitation, and most regrettably, its contamination with criminality which appears to have overwhelmed an unarguably justified agitation.

Yes, we say it is a justifiable agitation as C. IKEAZOR in his book entitled 'The truth and nothing but the truth' described the plight of the people of the region in these words "Nigeria's treatment of the people of the oil producing areas is nothing short of ingratitude and disrespect wrapped in a package of contempt for a people whose resources have sustained Nigeria for over thirty years. Oil and nothing else has paid for all the soldiers and dictators toys, the guns, the tanks,

the jets, limousines state houses etc. Oil has paid for all the excesses of Nigeria's elites, nouveau riche, and civilian and military ruling classes including the traditional rulers, their summer holiday trips, their mansions at home and abroad, their mistresses and imported foreign prostitutes, their Viagra pills, subsidised and unnecessarily repetitive hall trips, their fancy night clubs and hotels. Oil has made Nigeria what it is today and yet oil politics and revenue allocation have impoverished, deprived and denied the very people from whose soil it comes"

Ikeazor's postulation is better appreciated when the prevailing condition in the region is physically encountered rather than imagined. Now, it must be emphasized that oil is an exhaustible resource, as exemplified by Oloibiri community which sign-posted Nigeria among the committee of oil producers, and the plethora of dried-up oil fields and wells dotting the regions landscape.

With little or nothing to show for the huge sacrifices associated with the exploration and exploitation of oil and gas in the region, characterized by environmental/ecological despoliation and a wide range of hazards, including health and other socio-economic consequences, as the industry has largely delimited the traditional lifestyle and occupation of the people, any call to redress such a situation could be nothing short of genuine.

However, the derailment of this noble and clarion call and its corruption with criminality and brigandage is the major point of departure and where a clear line has to be drawn. I have taken pains to make myself clear on this. I am not against the struggle to seek redress over the criminal neglect, marginalization, under-development etc that have been visited on the people of the region over the years. I am against the scourge of criminality, militancy or any other unlawful means, applied to prosecute this mission, as it would be counter productive and would certainly spell doom rather than any foreseeable gain. It is this monster of criminality that I have undertaken to confront head-on and fight to a stand-still.

SUMMARY OF PREDISPOSING FACTORS/ISSUES FUELING THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Today, this is the most potent of all the challenges in the region. The prevalence of multi-national companies



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in the region has made little impact on majority of its citizenry. Consequently, there is a high level of infrastructural deficit, unemployment, poverty, illiteracy ignorance, diseases and alarming evidence of all the indices of underdevelopment. A closer look at some of the socio-economic indicator should signpost a clearer picture:-

INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT

Years of neglect, coupled with a treacherous terrain have conspired to bequeath the region with huge infrastructural deficit. For instance, the region ranks lowest in the area of Federal roads. Most communities in the region are yet to see electricity while others having electricity are yet to be connected to the National grid. Transportation to the hinterland is a major ordeal for the people of the region in view of obvious constraints of waterway transport. Difficult terrain of the region, characterized by swamps and marshy environment has also made the cost of construction much more expensive as against other friendly terrains.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment statistics of the region is alarmingly high. With the oil and gas industry wreaking much damage on the fauna and flora of the region and by

extension destroying the traditional industry of fishing and farming, most able bodied employable citizens are left unemployed. This is further compounded by an industry dominated by non-indigenes who fill every available space with their non-indigenous relatives.

This is a direct consequence of unemployment, environmental/ecological despoliation as a result of the activities of the oil industry which have shrunk available space for farming and reduced yields from fishing. Other indices such as diseases, illiteracy, ignorance, are also exacerbating factors.

ECOLOGICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Arguably ecological problems, arising from exploitation of natural resources by oil companies have been a major problem in the Niger Delta. This is because most of the locals' means of livelihood, such as fishing, farming as well as sources of portable water are affected by pollution and other environmental effects of exploration activities. In addition to this, the locals have not been the direct beneficiaries of the wealth from such exploitation over the years; this has led to various forms of agitations. Ecological problems include oil spillage, water pollution and gas flaring. There are also indications that, the communities are not adequately compensated when their areas are polluted.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES:

The mind according to popular logic is the cradle of all thoughts and actions. Psychological threats are those assaults on the peoples' mind which are capable of influencing an individual or group of persons to hold attitudes or opinions, contrary to the pursuit of National or State goals and objectives. This negative attitude can be nurtured through the misrepresentation of government activities, subversion, rumour mongering and terrorism. The Mass Media plays a major role in this.

RESOURCE CONTROL/FISCAL FEDERALISM CONUNDRUM

Another critical demand of the people of the region is the Resource Control agitation, Derivation Principle and the practice of fiscal Federalism. If we must speak the truth, we should admit that these are vital ingredients of Federalism as we profess to be a Federal state. However, the absence of these core values in our Federal policy against the backdrop of injustice and inequity in the appropriation of State resources have provoked sustained anger and agitation in such a proportion that is impacting negatively on the Niger Delta crisis.

PHASES IN THE MANIFESTATION OF THE CRISIS

If we must tell ourselves the very truth, dissecting crisis of any nature in modern day Nigeria will take us back to pre-colonial "Nigeria" and the role played by the British in amalgamating the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, as well as the antecedents of British colonialism and the legacy it left behind for the fledging independent state.

According to Kathy Hughes, "the instability and confusion of the region can only be understood by starting at the beginning of the story. This is not as it would seem, 1960 when Nigeria was granted independence from Britain. In fact many of the conflicts which rage

today have their roots in the events which took place while Nigeria was under British Colonial rule."

Hughes argues that managing the fallout of the contradictions inherent in clamping peoples of diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages etc into one nation goes far beyond the fiat of such amalgamation. It demands a conscious and deliberate approach towards forging 'NATIONHOOD', and it is in this very essential domain (attainment of nationhood) that Nigeria continues to remain a toddler.

The amalgamation of Nigeria threw up three giants that eventually constituted the foundation upon which Nigeria's tripod political structure was erected and eventually entrenched. This came with all the deficits of ethnicity, nepotism, tribalism, unhealthy rivalry etc that eventually characterized Nigeria's body politics. In the slippery and treacherous atmosphere of this interplay, the minorities weighed their chances and realized how dangerously handicapped they were. It became obvious that their chances of survival in this contraption were not as promising, and this gave vent to minorities' rights agitation.

One of the earliest yields of this minorities' agitation was the setting up of the Sir Henry Willinks Commission in 1957. Exerpts of the Committee report, published in 1958 confirmed the fears of the minorities and submitted inter alia that the entire area be declared a Special Federal Territory, and a Special Board be constituted to facilitate its development as the area is 'poor, backward and neglected'.

The Willinks Commission could be classified among initiatives applied by past and present administrations in addressing this conundrum, and these responses will be evaluated in detail when the paper approaches the phases of management of the crisis. However, this government will continue with the progression of this agitation from peaceful to violent and to a criminal enterprise.

The forebears of the Niger Delta have blazed the trail in resistance against oppressive conduct by constituted authority. Sir George Taubman-Goldies efforts to secure greater control of the palm oil resources provoked the legendary King Koko of Nembe in 1895 to launch the Akassa war as an "Expression of the king's determination to protect the rights of his people against oppressive power that sought to marginalize and sidetrack them" Azaiki (2003:153).

King Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri, Oba of Benin etc had at one time in point challenged, and where necessary, violently, the British colonial masters in one form of protest or the other against perceived oppression. Where this has led to armed resistance, weapons supplied by the colonial masters to facilitate capture of slaves for export have come in handy to prosecute such resistance.

Then came the Jasper Adaka Boro era culminating in the declaration of the Niger Delta Republic on 23rd February, 1966, and later, the 'Twelve day Revolution' which was short-lived as it was crushed by the Ojukwu led Eastern Region Government. Boro was later conscripted into the Nigerian Army and fought on the side of the Federal troops in the Nigerian Civil War until his eventual death at the Port Harcourt front.

Even though peaceful call for redress never relapsed at any given time, the

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