ISS Seminar Report

Nature's Gift, Man's Curse: Oil, Violence and Prospects for Peace in the Niger Delta of Nigeria
Pretoria, 14 August 2008

Presenters: Dr. Victor Ojakorotu (Department of International Studies, Monash University, Johannesburg)

Chair: David Zounmenou (Senior Researcher, Africa Security Analysis Programme)

Introduction

The objective of the seminar was to look at the current crisis in the Niger Delta and probe the extent to which viable solutions to the problems afflicting the oil rich region could be found. In doing so, the presenter, Dr. Victor Ojakorotu, first sought to place the conflict in its historical context by examining the nature of political conflict prior to the discovery of oil, the subsequent discovery of oil and the interconnectedness of the major role players that have emerged since, the current state of affairs and lastly solutions for lasting peace.

Presentation

Dr. Ojakorotu began the seminar by highlighting the centrality of oil in the development of states. One of the key observations made early on was that while oil, and mineral resource endowment in general had the potential to provide socio-economic development, not all states have been able to leverage this advantage for the benefit of their citizens. The question underpinning the seminar therefore was why have some countries been more adept than others at handling their resource endowments? He noted that while Nigeria, his country of origin, is richly endowed with both natural and human resources, it is rather unfortunate that conflict such as the one that afflicts the Niger Delta region of the country continues to impede serious efforts at development. It was on this basis of oil as ‘nature’s gift and man’s curse’ that Dr. Ojakorotu chose to frame at the Niger Delta crisis.

In seeking to provide a historical context to the crisis, Dr. Ojakorotu made a distinction between two periods: the period prior to and the period after the discovery of crude oil. In the period prior to the discovery of oil, (1956), which is also synonymous to the colonial period (October, 1960), agricultural produce and other mineral resources provided the backbone of the Nigerian economy. Each region was associated with a particular agricultural commodity: cocoa was prevalent in the Southwest, palm oil and coal were the main produce in the South-east whilst the North produced groundnuts and tin.

With regards to resource allocation during the colonial and immediate post-independence periods, Dr. Ojakorotu noted that the distribution of national wealth was undertaken by the respective regions, (later states), which contributed a certain percentage of their income to the national coffers. He also pointed to the existence of political conflict, which took the form of agitation for political representation and protection against marginalization (by majority ethnic groups of Hausa/Fulani, Yorubas and Igbos). The reaction of the colonial government was the Willinks Commission, which produced a report on Nigeria’s minority ethnic groups. The report identified the region as being poor, backward and marginalized and canvassed special attention to and development of the region.

The achievement of independence four years after the discovery of oil brought greater complexities to the problems that already existed in the Niger Delta. The discovery of crude oil, according to Dr. Ojakorotu, shifted the parameters for the sharing of national revenue: crude oil was put on the exclusive legislative list in favour of the Federal (central) Government. This implication of this was that resource allocation from the proceeds of oil shifted from being the responsibility of the region/ state, to being that of the government. Adding to the complexities of the region, Dr. Ojakorotu stated, that the operations of major oil companies in prospecting and exploitation catapulted it into a hotbed of socio-political and economic protests as a result of environmental degradation and the states inability to respond appropriately to the challenges posed by the accompanying effects. As a result of decades of confrontation and instability in the region, Dr. Ojakorotu identified five points that characterize the current reality of the Niger Delta region:

- Lack of social and economic development - a critical issue for which the Willinks Commission was intended to address.
- Environmental insecurity
- Lack of good governance
- Militarization of the region
- The retention of legislation that is widely perceived as obnoxious

Dr. Ojakorotu implicated five actors as contributors to the current crisis in the Niger Delta. Firstly the state and oil multinationals, he argued, were jointly responsible for environmental degradation, water, air and land pollution. As the oil multinationals are primarily concerned with profits and can thus be said to be less concerned with environmental destruction, the speaker focused on the policies of the state such as the Oil Pipelines Act and the Environmental Impact Assessment Act, which while enabling the oil multinationals, made powerless the local people.

The result of the propagation of biased legislation, lack of development and environmental degradation among others, has influenced the emergence of a multitude of social movements/ ethnic militias which resorted to armed rebellion against law enforcement agencies. In addition this, Dr. Ojakorotu noted, other local responses to oil exploration have been hostage taking, oil pipeline destruction, riots, mob attacks and other general damage to oil companies' assets. The impact of those attacks is perceptible in the lost recorded by Nigeria in its daily oil production (30%). Nigeria has lost its position as the top oil producing country in Africa prompting Angola to take the lead.

While other key actors in the crisis, namely non-governmental organizations and the international community play a part in the continuing instability in the Niger Delta region, it is important to note that the speaker primarily fingered the state in the crisis, particularly its inability to develop the region. Initiatives such as the Oil Minerals producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and its successor, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have, according to Dr. Ojakorotu, failed due to their inability to address the needs of the people of the Niger Delta and particularly corruption and bad governance. Without engaging in an inclusive dialogue, any initiative aimed at building peace in the Niger Delta will be rejected as an externally imposed idea, suggested the speaker.

Dr. Ojakorotu concluded the seminar by asking, is peace possible, given the complexity of the crisis? He asserted that it was, but only if various steps were followed:

- An assessment of environmental damage must be urgently undertaken in the Niger Delta in order to adequately address the problem of environmental sustainability – with the heightened environmental consciousness among the regions people, the possibilities of the environment assuming greater significance as a grievance issue could remain a sticking point for all stakeholders.

- The government should, as a matter of priority, devise a workable environmental policy to regulate oil operations in the Niger Delta.

- An interim measure, as a prelude to building sustainable peace, is the payment of adequate compensation to (affected) local communities even as this is expected to continue in view of the fact that oil activities are not incident-free.

- The convocation of a conference of ethnic nationalities where all stakeholders in the polity could engage with the underlying causes of the crises.

- Dialogue between the government and the oil communities in the region. The present crisis in the region is being fuelled partly by the lingering militarist disposition on both sides.

- The state should initiate policies on disarmament and reintegration of the militias, early warning system and peace building, employment, etc.

- Good political and corporate governance must be promoted.