
Lessons from the Resolution of the Niger Delta Crisis

Paper presented by Hon. Kingsley Kuku (Chairman, Presidential Amnesty Programme) at the Development Discourse event held on Thursday January 29, 2015 at the Transcorp Hilton Hotel Abuja

I am exceedingly grateful to our friends at Nextier for offering me this very profound platform to speak briefly on the war against insurgency in the northeastern parts of our great country and attempt to proffer ways the insurgency could be mitigated using lessons learnt from the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis and the management of the Presidential Amnesty Programme for former agitators in the Niger Delta.

Drawing from my varied experiences as a Niger Delta activist, a conflict and dispute resolution scholar and of course my current assignment as the Special Adviser to the President on Niger Delta and the Chairman of the Presidential Amnesty Programme, permit me to offer a brief insight into how the seemingly intractable crisis in the Niger Delta was curbed, leading to the extraction of peace agreement from the leaders of ex-agitators in the zone. I was an active participant in the struggle for economic, social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta and a signatory to the bible of the struggle, the Kaiama Declaration in 1998 wherein Ijaw youths sought full control of the resources in Ijawland; by extension we were also seeking same conditions for our fellow Niger Deltans, as did Isaac Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa before our time.

It was a difficult time as the Federal Government responded with the use of force, a continuation of the policy that led to the unfortunate loss of hundreds (if not thousands) of precious lives on all sides including of course the “judicial murder” of world acclaimed environmentalist, Ken Saro- Wiwa in November 1995.

It was not long before a combination of factors resulted into various armed movements in the Niger Delta. At the height of violent conflict in the Niger Delta, oil production went dangerously below one million barrels per day (mbpd) and kidnappings of oil workers and others deemed prosperous was rampant. The conflict in the Niger Delta had all but pushed Nigeria off the fiscal cliff. Conversely, the conflict worsened the poverty and underdevelopment index in this otherwise rich part of our great country. Even when the Niger Delta struggle was a justifiable one, it showed also that conflicts or insecurity repels development and transformation. Luckily however peace offer was made by the Federal Government, which was graciously accepted by agitators in the Niger Delta, which paved the way for the amnesty proclamation. Today, the Niger Delta has become the safest and most secure zone in Nigeria.

Given this huge benefit of the resolution of the crisis and insecurity in the Niger Delta, the logical question to ask is: how was peace achieved in the Niger Delta at a time many had assumed that the conflicts in the zone had become intractable? As a key participant in the struggle, I shall, very briefly, give you an insider’s account.

The processes of achieving political solution rather than sustaining the military option in solving the Niger Delta crisis began earnestly in 2007 and was led by political, opinion and intellectual leaders in the Niger Delta ably coordinated by the then Vice President, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Even though he was a sitting Vice-President, Dr. Jonathan was physically involved in major negotiations and consultations, which led to the brokering of the peace accord between the Federal Government and the Niger Delta ex-agitators. Dr. Jonathan defied all security advice and warnings at the time to undertake visits to the militants-controlled creek areas of the Niger Delta, particularly the then dreaded Camp Five in Delta State which was under the command of Chief Government Owezide Ekpemupolo, otherwise known as Tompolo. Dr. Jonathan risked his life and breached all protocols for the sake and objective of extracting peace commitment and ensuring total ceasefire in the region.

I recall vividly Dr. Jonathan's visit to Camp Five. Several leaders of the Niger Delta including Chief E.K Clerk and Chief Tony Anenih accompanied him on that trip. As the secretary of the Niger Delta Peace Committee already in place then, I was privileged to be at this particular meeting. In Camp Five, Tompolo and other leaders of the agitation made the then Vice President sit on a bare plank of wood for a meeting that lasted for several hours. It was indeed at this meeting that the Federal Government of Nigeria extracted peace commitment from the ex-agitators, which in turn led to the amnesty proclamation. So today, we salute the courage of President Goodluck Jonathan and also pay tribute to his predecessor, the Late Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'Adua who graciously yielded to wise counsel and proclaimed amnesty for the former agitators in the Niger Delta on June 25, 2009. It is our fervent prayer that Almighty God will grant the soul of our late President eternal rest.

I am also very aware that political, opinion, community, traditional, religious and intellectual leaders in the southwest of Nigeria played key roles in reining in the Oodoa Peoples Congress (OPC) when their activities became inimical to development and transformation in the zone. Today, OPC operatives have become respectable officers and men of Lagos State Transport Management Authority (LATSMA), Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI), Lagos State Waste Management Authority (LAWMA), Lagos State Emergency Management Agency (LASEMA), Lagos State Signage and Advertisement Agency (LASSA) Lagos State Residence Registration Agency (LASRAA), Lagos State Parks and Garden Agency (LASPAGA), Lagos State Planning and Environmental Monitoring Agency (LASPEMA) and several other agencies of the government of Lagos State. In the southeast of Nigeria also, community, political, religious, opinion, and intellectual leaders were also on hand to curb the excesses of MASSOB when the activities of the group began militating against development and transformation in the southeast.

I have said in several occasions and I will reiterate it here that even while the Federal Government and the Armed forces of our great nation are doing all they can to restore peace, safety and security in north-eastern Nigeria, political, community, opinion, religious and intellectual leaders in northern Nigeria must borrow a leaf from Niger Delta leaders, southwest leaders as well as leaders in the southeastern parts of the country and lead efforts to restore peace, safety and security in their communities. The greatest mistake any person or group of persons could ever make is to politicize insecurity, particularly terrorism. The war against insurgency and terrorism must be a collective one but I insist, based on facts I have presented to you today, that northern leaders must lead the charge against obvious enemies of their people, their religion, their land and people. The political resolution of the Niger Delta crisis has since shown that it is not all the time that guns, bombs, land mines and air raids are used in stemming conflicts. I am indeed an adherent of Benjamin Franklin's position that "There was never a good war or a bad peace."

As a senior Official of this administration, I am aware that President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan plans to transform all facets of Nigeria. In the north, the President has since elected to use education as a veritable tool to end squalor, poverty and deprivation in that part of the country. On this score, he has since established special schools to absorb thousands of northern boys and girls who for years were denied formal, western education. He has also established Federal Universities in all the northern states of Nigeria. Like we all are well aware, this educational revolution in northern Nigeria is one of the reasons the Boko Haram insurgents have given for their terrorist activities. But my compatriots, one of the greatest duties of any responsible government is to offer its citizens profound education. Education is the most potent weapon against poverty, underdevelopment and even insecurity.

Globally, it has been proven that in times of crisis or war, citizens bury their differences and join efforts to defeat the common enemy. Nigeria cannot be an exception to this golden rule. My position therefore is that given that President Goodluck Jonathan has shown that he is sincere and that he can deliver, it behoves all patriotic Nigerians to support him as he works assiduously to transform our dear country, like he promised. Our dear brothers and sisters in the north, particularly in the north-eastern parts of our dear country must guard against the politicization of terrorism and

join all on-going efforts by the Federal Government to rout the insurgents in their communities, villages, towns and States.

Once again, I thank the organizers of this policy discourse for offering me this platform to give my humble perspectives on national security and to share with you the lessons we have learnt from extracting peace from militant agitators in the Niger Delta and the management of the Presidential Amnesty Programme for former agitators in the Niger Delta, hoping that same approach could be adopted to curb the unfortunate insurgency in the northeast. I thank you.

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