

In Fight Over Oil-Rich Delta, Firepower Grows Sophisticated

Militants Holding Foreigners in Nigeria Tap Support Among Poor

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PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria -- People steeped in the bloody history of the Niger Delta recall when militants battling for control of the vast oil reserves here traded their fishing spears and machetes for locally made hunting guns and then, a few years later, upgraded to imported AK-47 assault rifles.

But those days now seem long ago to the delta's beleaguered residents and observers of the decades-old conflict, who say government forces and the militants fighting them are both using profits from record-high oil prices to rearm themselves with unprecedented levels of firepower.

The government, according to Nigerian news reports, is shopping in international markets for new weaponry. And the militants, who support their operations by tapping directly into pipelines and selling the stolen oil in a bustling black market, are using the proceeds to stockpile belt-fed machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

Dozens of militants displayed such weapons, fully loaded, during interviews last month on a stretch of river they appeared to control. With photographers snapping away, the hooded and camouflaged young men waved their guns menacingly at journalists and at one of the nine hostages they seized last month. The hostage, Macon Hawkins, an oil worker from Texas, and five others were later released.

The hundreds and perhaps thousands of unemployed young men who make up the militant forces have stockpiled boxes of ammunition that are as big as tables, said Ledum A. Mitee, head of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, a human rights group that advocates on behalf of the ethnic group in the delta.

Mitee saw weapons caches when he visited a base in January to help negotiate the release of four foreign hostages, he said. "I left thinking the situation was more serious than it has ever been," he said.

His group, whose former leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was hanged for treason in 1995, opposes violence. But Mitee said that sympathy is growing among residents of this impoverished region for armed confrontation with government forces that long have spirited the delta's oil wealth to far-off government projects and into the pockets of corrupt politicians.

The weapons come from many sources, according to analysts and independent groups such as Human Rights Watch. Corrupt police sell from their own stocks, sometimes offering training for an extra fee. Politicians import weapons to arm their personal militias. And oil companies hire and arm youths to protect their facilities. The guns often end up in the hands of militants, who also buy directly from international dealers.

Last June in Warri, a major delta port, militants purchased \$5 million worth of weapons, included rocket-propelled grenade launchers, hand grenades and a variety of machine guns, said Patrick Naagbanton, a researcher for the Project for Environment, Human Rights and Development, a delta-based nongovernmental organization.

"There are so many more guns than before -- bigger guns, more sophisticated guns," he said.

The growing firepower has mixed with rising political frustration and jittery, overstretched global oil markets to produce an increasingly combustible mix here.

A new militant umbrella group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, has launched a series of attacks on oil facilities that have cut national production by 20 percent. Nigeria, with an average output of 2.5 million barrels per day, is the fifth-largest supplier to the United States. The group was also responsible for the recent kidnappings.

The group is threatening more attacks unless the government embarks on extensive new development projects, releases two of the region's political leaders who are in prison on criminal charges and curbs Nigerian military presence in the delta.

Government officials blame the rising violence on well-organized criminal gangs desperate to protect their access to stolen oil at a time when the military is cracking down on theft. A Nigerian navy spokesman, Capt. Obiara C. Medani, said in an interview in Abuja, the national capital: "It's a sophisticated campaign to give them a free hand. That's what this thing is all about."

Whatever the motives of the militant leaders, their aggressive tactics against the government and foreign-owned oil companies have won broad sympathy among a population that sees little benefit from hosting one of the world's most lucrative oil industries at a time of record profits.

Recruiting militants has never been easier, community leaders here say.

"Jobless youths, they have nothing to do. They have nothing to lose," said Kimse Okoko, president of the Ijaw National Congress, a political organization representing the largest ethnic group in the delta's villages, few of which have schools, electricity or access to clean water.

Southeastern Nigeria has been agitating for independence nearly since the discovery of oil here in the 1950s, and the prospect of controlling the newfound wealth contributed to the disastrous 1967-70 Biafra war, when southeastern Nigeria attempted to secede.

In interviews, the militants repeatedly make reference to the long history of the struggle and the failure of the government or the oil companies to make meaningful improvements in the lives of delta residents. The time for peaceful political action, they say, is over.

"We will bring the Nigerian government and oil companies to their knees," a spokesman for the militants, who uses the pseudonym Jomo Gbomo, said in an e-mail. He said the group "will continue with our campaign until our demands are met or until there is no drop of oil exported from Nigeria."

He estimated that 30,000 assault rifles remain in the region as the result of political battles here in recent years and that new weaponry continues to arrive. "Certainly the number of heavy weapons in the delta has increased dramatically in the last few years," Gbomo said.

He denied that the militants were using stolen oil to pay for their struggle, but one of the Niger Delta militant leaders who is in jail, Mujahid Dokubo-Asari, acknowledged the practice in an interview with Human Rights Watch in 2004. "I take that which belongs to me," Dokubo-Asari was quoted as saying. "It is not theft. The oil belongs to our people."

Few here disagree. In the fishing village of Biriaya-ama, a 45-minute motorboat ride from Port Harcourt, young men said they were frustrated after years of surviving on meager catches as billions of dollars of oil was pumped out of the region. John Sokaribo, 24, said he knew from reports on a village radio -- powered by a rare gas-powered generator -- that oil prices were topping \$60 a barrel.

The average wage in Nigeria has stagnated at barely more than \$1 a day even as government revenue from oil, the largest single source, has more than doubled in recent years. Abuja, already filled with massive, modern buildings on wide, well-paved streets, is bustling with new construction. Even in Port Harcourt, elegant mansions are being built not far from shantytowns.

"We don't see any benefit. We don't see anything because of the bad government that we have," said Sokaribo. He said he longed for a life beyond fishing in rivers where oil spills have killed off most of the fish.

Last year, Sokaribo said, he applied for a job with Shell oil in the nearby city of Bonny but never even received a response. If militants came on a recruiting trip to Biriaya-ama, Sokaribo said, he might join.

"Those boys," he said of the militants, "they fight for our benefit."

