

## Editorial Introduction: The Warri Crisis, the Niger Delta, and the Nigerian State

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Warri is a strategic city in the Niger Delta. As the second major oil city after Port Harcourt, Warri is the center of scores of oil installations and the nerve center of the operations of oil companies in the western Niger Delta, particularly the U.S. major, Chevron-Texaco. Since colonial times, control of Warri has been the principal *casus belli* in a lingering conflict among the three ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo). Although initially the conflict was over land, fishing rights and cultural differences, oil has become the highly charged political issue, as a huge oil economy has grown around the city. The insecurity produced by the Warri crisis has repeatedly led to the shut down of oil installations, leading many to believe that Warri is now the litmus test for measures to resolve the problems of the Niger Delta.

In a report published in late 2003, Human Rights Watch documented the escalation of violence in Warri since the first serious conflicts in 1997 (HRW 2003). Hundreds have been killed and thousands displaced: the details of the violence are difficult to document in the slums and around the creeks where much of the violence has occurred. The crisis involves issues of peace, human rights and environmental justice; it has led to intermittent fighting resulting in the loss of life and the periodic shutdown of oil production and export. At stake is the stability of the entire oil and, more important, the political stability of the entire Niger Delta. Running across the inter-ethnic conflicts over the governance of Warri is a complex story of corruption, oil politics, oil theft (called bunkering), and machine party politics.

Disputes over government resources and control of crude oil, including the stolen oil, drive the violence that has engulfed parts of Nigeria's oil-producing Niger Delta. The Human Rights Watch report documents how violence in Nigeria's southern Delta State, especially during the state and federal elections in April and May 2003, resulted in hundreds of deaths, the displacement of thousands of people, and the destruction of hundreds of homes. Among the dead were dozens killed by government security forces. At the height of the violence, 40% of Nigeria's oil production was closed down, and most oil companies withdrew their staff. "The people of

the Niger Delta have suffered horribly from living amid the source of Nigeria's wealth," said Bronwen Manby, deputy director of the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch and the author of the report. "And the perpetrators get away with these crimes without even the faintest chance of being brought to justice."

The perpetrators of violence in Delta State are the state security forces and armed ethnic militias belonging to the Delta's three major ethnic groups fighting over rule in Warri. Collectively, the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo constitute an absolute majority of the population of the Niger Delta. Since the Human Rights Watch report was released, renewed violence has broken out once again in Delta State and Warri, and although peace negotiations of various sorts are progress, the depth and profundity of the crisis requires immediate and serious attention.

In Nigeria, individuals in government office often have virtually unchecked control over resources. Elections are therefore a focus for violence and fraud. Delta State produces 40% of Nigeria's two million barrels a day of crude oil and is supposed to receive 13% of the revenue from production in the state — so control of government positions is a particularly large prize. In addition, the warring factions are fighting for control of the theft of crude oil, known as "illegal oil bunkering." Illegally bunkered oil accounts for perhaps 10% of Nigeria's oil production, bringing profits that are probably more than US\$1 billion a year. Both politicians and those who head the illegal bunkering rackets — sometimes the same people — employ armed militia to ensure their reelection or defend their operations.

On 24 November 2003, the police arrested three journalists at Lagos-based *Insider* magazine, detained them for two days, and charged them with sedition and defamation of character in connection with an article alleging that the vice president of Nigeria and the national security adviser to the president were involved in large-scale theft of crude oil. "Although the violence has both ethnic and political dimensions, it is essentially a fight over the oil money — both government revenue and the profits of stolen crude," Human Rights Watch said. "Efforts to halt the violence and end the civilian

suffering that has accompanied it must therefore include steps both to improve government accountability and to end the theft of oil."

This issue of the ACAS Bulletin is the result of preparatory work I did with Michael Watts, Okey Ibeanu and Ike Okonta for a workshop to address the crisis in Warri. The meeting, now postponed, was to have taken place in May 2004 at Blue Mountain Center in New York State. The workshop's aim was to address the need to understand fully the political dynamics of the contemporary struggles over Warri in order to provide a framework within which government, local communities and the oil transnationals can all be held accountable; we also hoped to lay out some dimensions of a just and responsible political machinery for the governance of Warri. The meeting would bring together a group of participants from the three main ethnic groups who are in regular contact with the communities in the Delta and who could reflect the sentiments of people; as well, representatives of two of the most important and central NGOs operating in the Niger Delta — Leaders of Our Niger Delta and Environmental Rights Action — were to participate. Working with other Nigerians who could contribute their related experiences and a team of conflict resolution specialists from Rutgers, we hoped the outcome would be a new frame for a solution to the crisis.

The appeal of this Blue Mountain initiative lay, first, in the center's remoteness from the immediate Niger Delta and national contexts of the conflict. Second, it was to take place during a period of relative peace in Warri, thereby offering an opportunity for dispassionate engagement of the issues. This timing contrasts with previous initiatives, most of which emerged in the immediate aftermath of eruptions of violence when positions were hardened and memories fresh on all sides. Third, an international initiative such as this would have raised the profile of the Warri crisis and its management, as well as confidence building measures among the communities.

This initiative still holds great prospects of the parties trusting the process because of its international character and visibility. One of the concerns that factions have raised about past conflict management attempts is that they could not trust the process, especially the sincerity of government and other mediators. Finally, past initiatives have tended to focus too much on getting a peace accord quickly signed by the warring factions, with little attention paid to expression of the contending positions and a cooling off and confidence building period. The Blue

Mountain initiative was to provide ample opportunity for all positions to be vented in a non-threatening manner, mediated by experts in negotiation and conflict management. We still hope to hold this meeting, if we can raise the necessary funds, for which we are appealing.

We originally requested the articles in this issue as background information for the meeting. The Bulletin leads off with an analytical overview of the Niger Delta by Ben Naanen. It is followed by three general observations on the crises of the Nigerian State, the Niger Delta and Warri (Kayode Soremekun, Dan Omoweh and Okechukwu Ibeanu). Note that our authors refer to the rulers in a variety of ways — ruling class, elites, militariat, rentiers, political class, state managers, clique of gatekeepers, and users of revolving doors. Kayode Soremekun makes the case for considering three inter-related crises, not just one in Warri. Dan Omoweh tries to hammer out the shape of the struggle over Warri; he makes the claim, which not all analysts do, that this crisis is political, not economic. Ibeanu shows how rulership (as it is called in Nigeria) has passed from so-called military to so-called civilian rule; he states that the discourse of "resource control" is pertinent not just to the Federal Government's hand in this crisis, but also to the entire Nigerian public and media. Resource control is a powerful discourse, and Ibeanu correctly notes that it takes away from the issue of human rights — a shift clearly marked in the media when Obasanjo came into power.

Ike Okonta provides a case study of Nembe, a Delta community hard hit by the conflict. Rather than constructing and analyzing the factions, that are always changing, he analyzes elite alliances that bring together what are usually imagined as disparate actors. And he shows how the transnational actors are just as much involved in Nigerian corruption as the elites. Not even the best Nigerian media pulls this off very often. The role of women in the conflict is described in a press release from Environmental Rights Action. This situation, in which colonial notions of masculinity and power come together with indigenous conceptions, offers potential for a feminist analysis that could contribute towards understanding the violence and how people manage to cope with daily onslaughts of brutality. In their essay, Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill try to analyze the women's protests in terms of a global power shift from corporate rule toward popular communal movements.

Also included in this issue is Peter Ekeh's report on an earlier attempt in 1999 to hold a peace summit on

the Warri Crisis. Ekeh represents one of the factions (he is president of the Urhobo Historical Society), and in this report he is really speaking to a Nigerian audience. For background on what brought the Nigerians together for this meeting, please consult his excellent and informative website (<http://www.waado.org/>). Finally, and with the greatest pleasure, we present a four-part poem by Ogaga Ifowodo, written for Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni 9.

A word about our contributors, all of whom have been active on Delta issues for many years: Ben Nannen, a founding member of MOSOP (Mobilisation for the Survival of Ogoni People), is Professor at the University of Port Harcourt; Kayode Soremekun is Professor of International Relations and Dean of the Faculty of Administration at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife; Okechukwu Ibeanu is Program Officer with the MacArthur Foundation, Abuja; Dan Omoweh is Senior Research Fellow, Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos; and Ogaga Ifowodo is a human rights activist, lawyer and award winning poet. Terisa Turner is a sociologist and anthropologist at the University of Guelph in Ontario, and Leigh Brownhill is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto; they are members of First Woman (the East and Southern African Women's Oral History and Indigenous Knowledge Network) and co-direct the International Oil Working Group.

A final word. One of the reviewers fears this issue of the Bulletin will once again project the view that Africa is full of "failed states," "violence out of control," and "hopelessness." Our authors do discuss resistance, most often in the context of violence, but they suggest that the resistance itself has become quite corrupt. None of the articles gives an account of the strength and struggle of civil society organizations, and there are a lot of grass roots organizations focusing on building schools, health clinics, and other community facilities. They are trying to survive and stay out of the conflict, using new funding from diverse sources available since Obasanjo came to power. Because of the purpose for which these articles were written, they comprise a political sketch that foregrounds war and violence. ACAS cannot ignore the interminable suffering. We need to remember colonial legacies, the dominant, even determinant, role of international capital (the international oil companies cannot be separated from acts of corruption and violence), and the alliance of rulers and capital (whether military or not) that crushes local peoples.

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**References**

HRW. 2003. "The Warri Crisis: Fueling Violence." New York: Human Rights Watch.

**Map of the Niger Delta Region** (reprinted courtesy of Review of African Political Economy)

