



EDO DEVELOPMENT FORUM, EDF

[...a pan Edo roundtable for peace, unity, nationalism and real economic development](#)

The Chairman, Your Excellency, Former Governor of old Bendel State of Nigeria, Dr Samuel Osaigbovo Ogbemudia, Guests of Honour, Your Excellency, The Nigerian High Commissioner to the UK, Senator Alhaji Tafida, Your Excellency the Deputy Governor of Akwa Ibom State, Engr. Patrick Ekpotu, Special Guests of Honour, Your Worship the Mayor of Barking and Dagenham, Rev Emmanuel Obasohan, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

NIGER DELTA TODAY: AN EDF PERSPECTIVE

In examining the Niger Delta of today, it is pertinent that we look critically at the physical and psychological indices of the area, - the environment and people. We must ask ourselves, how do the Niger Delta people really feel being a part of Nigeria a country that depends largely on the petroleum resources that lies inside its bowels but treat the area as a leper at times and as its whipping boy at other times? If we posit the fortunes of the Niger Delta in the context of Nigeria today, then we will begin to find reasons for the turn of events in this region of the world. Nothing is cheerful, everything is bleak and hopeless.

The Niger Delta span several States in the South-South region of Nigeria, namely, AKWA IBON, BAYELSA, CROSS RIVER, DELTA, EDO, and RIVERS STATES. Collectively they produce the largest share of the oil revenue, which Nigeria mostly depend on for its foreign exchange earnings but Oil production in Nigeria has had severe environmental and human consequences for the indigenous peoples who inhabit the areas surrounding oil exploration, exploitation and extraction.

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Apart from oil, another thing that binds these people is that they are largely ethnic minority people whose fear of annexation and oppression by the larger Nigerian nationalities just before independence from Britain was considered reasonable enough to be addressed by a colonial commission of enquiry – The Willink Minorities Commission of 1957 – 1958. The fears of lack of ethnic justice expressed by these minorities at that time still remain till today and is even worse because of the oil wealth the region generates as against their lack of political power to control Nigeria as a whole or even to control its natural resources. As a result there has been protracted disagreement between the people of the region and the Federal Government of Nigeria who they see as colonial masters in a mode worse than the British.

The Federal government's policy of using the military to pacify the area, which has resulted in major flashpoints of troubles such as the Ogoni tragedies – the destruction of Ogoni towns and villages and the execution of its leaders led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the destruction of Odi and Choba in Bayelsa and Rivers and more recently Agge, the reduction of Warri, a once thriving oil city to a ghost town, etc.

What we hear of the Niger Delta today are news of kidnapping of people especially oil company workers for ransom, whole towns being raised to the ground by soldier of the Nigerian army as if they were invading a foreign land, blowing-up of oil pipelines, rebel militias, armed robbery gangs, assassinations, ethnic rivalries leading to wars between Ijaw and Itsekiri, Ogoni and Andoni, urban youths and soldiers, ethnic youths and their leaders, etc, etc. According to the Movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, "The sole interest of the ruling oligarchy in our region has always been oil, and more oil. For all they care, the people can rot and perish in the oil poisoned environment," the group said, adding, "We are aware of the dubious political chicanery of the oil companies, in collaboration with the Federal Government, in setting ethnic nationalities against one another – Ijaw versus the Itsekiri, Andoni versus Ogoni, etc."

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What we see are polluted rivers, creeks and wells and land, effects of acid rain on the region's fauna and flora, various cancers in people because of activities of oil companies like oil spillages and gas flaring. Dead fishes upon the waters, unemployed fisher men and farmers, shrinking crops sizes where attempts are made to even farm the polluted land. We see OMPADEC (oil minerals production area development commission) and NDDC (Niger Delta Development Commission) after that with big money budgets, which monies are siphoned out of the region through the back door of puppets of the ruling powers put in control of these bodies.

The Niger Delta is right now in ferment as the people reacts and rises up to resist the wanton systematic degradation of their environment and the looting of their resources, which is effectively carted away to fund massive development projects elsewhere in the Country, like the shining and sprawling Federal Capital territory, Abuja, Lagos and the various tarmacs crisscrossing much of the Northern part of Nigeria.

The level of the peoples' anger at the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta and the Federal Government, has now given rise to armed, efficient organisations of very young, mostly, very highly motivated and articulate people who are determined to be listened to through their exploits on the battle field. These young men are tired of the lack of amenities and basic infrastructure necessary for the most basic economic development in their area – they would rather die on their feet than to keep living on their knees. They are now not so enamoured to being good Nigerians doing good things because of the mind-numbing levels of corruption of their “elected” – in most cases, “selected” or self-appointed rulers and the unabashed way they flaunt their ill-gotten wealth through opulence in indolence.

Pushed against the wall, unable and unwilling to take any more abuses, not trusting their “leaders”, these youths have formed themselves into the Joint Revolutionary Council, JRC, made up of Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, NDPVF, Martyrs Brigade, Movement of the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, and sundry other groups. They have now in more ways than one declared war on the Nigerian army in

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[...a pan Edo roundtable for peace, unity, nationalism and real economic development](#) their land. They storm and disrupt oil exploration at will killing or kidnapping workers. This they claim was to “show the armed forces of the Nigerian State that they can take them on anywhere, anytime and anyhow.

The attraction to groups like MEND and other armed gangs marauding in the region is clearly a vote of no confidence in the current leadership of governments in the area whom they see as lackeys and puppets of the ruling oligarchy. It is also an indication that unless their demand for resource control or a minimum of 50% of revenue generated from their resources is retained by each state in the federation, this violent uprising and armed insurgency to collect their piece of the national cake – oil money will go on unabated and the conflagration that will follow, will waste more lives, suck in foreign military powers who would be bogged down for God knows how long and further send global energy crisis spinning out of control. But do these armed groups represent the people of the Niger Delta? Are they acting on their people’s behalf or are they just opportunist carrying out nefarious acts for self aggrandisement?

Nigeria, the gigantic house that Lord Frederick Lugard built in West Africa in 1914 to the glory of imperial Britain, must have something seriously wrong with its super-structure that makes people wonder why a country, so wonderfully endowed by God Almighty with human and mineral resources, and potentially the greatest Black nation in the world ever, still cannot get its act together and take up its rightful place among the comity of nations. If Nigeria is a house, then the Niger Delta is the mortar that holds it together and like mortar the region is treated without any atom of respect due it, given back in appreciation.

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English, Third Edition, defines Mortar as “a mixture of lime with cement, sand and water used to hold bricks or stones together”. In civil engineering or general construction, no worthwhile building project – be it roads, bridges, dams or houses can be possible without mortar. The importance of the Niger Delta as the mortar in the Nigerian building project cannot be

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[...a pan Edo roundtable for peace, unity, nationalism and real economic development](#) overemphasised here. Suffice it to say that the region deserves more than what it is getting from being a part of Nigeria at the moment.

How else can one explain being forced to live under the gun and jackboot of other ethnic nationalities in a federation that is supposed to comprise of States and peoples of equal status? With the people voiceless, forced out of the mainstream of normal life, made to eke out a living like scavengers, what option exists for them? What about the disenfranchised, marginalized and impoverished peasantry in their millions who daily face the poverty and neglect in the region? Their lot for over 50 years since oil was first struck in their abandoned back waters has been dashed. Their hopes for the basic amenities to sustain life like, food, hospitals, shelter, portable pipe borne water, roads, electricity supplies, schools and employment and the traditional means of livelihood of the people, fishing and farming have been rendered null because the land, rivers and creeks have been polluted and denuded of life. And the people are mostly disenfranchised and abandoned like inanimate mortar in building. Only a few select people who do the bidding of the federal government or who are willing to sell the birthright of their people benefit abundantly thereby drawing the illk and distrust of the youths.

Nigeria is definitely not your run-of-the-mill Country. It is very different and unique in the way it has successfully evolved a brand of corporate and government life or system, which is an admix of possibly all known systems, underscored by a cutthroat tradition of winner takes all, in which the government is the all-in-all and the leader of the government is the kingpin – the big masquerade. A very important lesson to learn about Nigeria is that Government is the biggest business and whosoever is at the helms of affairs is the Chief Executive Officer of the business with unlimited, unquestioned powers over all resources and manpower. The major revenue earner and sustainer of Nigeria's economy is oil. Unfortunately, the land from which it is gotten – the Niger Delta, is polluted and desecrated. The cartel of the foreign oil companies – Shell, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Total Fina Elf, Mobil Oil Producing, etc and the Federal Government of Nigeria can amass any number of armies, armed with even yet-to-

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[...a pan Edo roundtable for peace, unity, nationalism and real economic development](#) be-ried military ordnances and even include weapons of mass destruction; they still won't be able to break the natural will of a people to defend their very being – their humanity.

One question we must each ask ourselves is, "What would we do if we ever felt Like Mortar? Would you roll over and take the abuse such as what Nigeria is dishing out to the Niger Delta or would you demand drastic changes to your life? Would you say to the Government - 'we have no more blood to shed for our oil?' Would you say, stop the exploitation of our resources and take up arms if this warning is not heeded? Would you accept the Vice-presidential position with at best token powers or would you demand for nothing but the presidency with full executive powers and unbelievable resources at your disposal to develop the region?

As concerned Nigerians from the Niger Delta region ourselves, the Edo Development Forum, EDF's minimum demands remains, a Sovereign National Conference of all nationalities to discuss and fashion out a genuine Peoples' Federal Republic of Nigeria based on equality of all without regard to gender, creed, political philosophy or ethnicity. We want a nation where power and wealth are equitably distributed. We want a crime free society where our children, our future, can learn and grow in peace and liberty. We want a society where government is only by the consent of the governed to which it must be accountable. We want a society in which ignorance, poverty and disease are banished forever. We demand that existing retrogressive laws such as the Petroleum Act of 1969 and 1991, the National Waterways Decree of 1997, and the Land Use Act of 1978 and 1993, that have been variously protested against by indigenous groups and other Nigerians be repealed without further delay.

Our people want incremental rights of resource ownership to States and indigenous peoples subject to prevailing socio-economic indices. For this reason, we are inclined to suggest a starting and taxable 50% ownership rights of resources.

We hereby refer the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency, Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'Adua to several well publicised position papers produced by

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genuine leaders of various Niger Delta communities such as, The Ogoni bill of Right, Urhobo Economic summit papers, the Kayama declaration, the Ibom People's congress papers, Edo National Association, Edo Okpamakhin, Oron declaration, Ijaw Peoples' Association, Solidarity Movement of the Southern Minorities of Nigeria and many other ethnic nationalities' papers produced at various fora where they have spoken at length on sundry issues that borders the people and will make for good neighbourliness if addressed. Such issues are resource control and unfettered development of infrastructure, provision of employment, a concerted effort to reclaim and treat the polluted land and waters for mechanised agriculture instead of beating about in the bush with the sponsorship of a Niger Delta summit that will be remote-controlled from Abuja. Thank you and God bless you all. Oba ghato Okpere!

THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED BY EDO DEVELOPMENT FORUM, EDF AT THE "FRIENDS OF AFRICA DINNER 2008" TO HONOUR OUTSTANDING AFRICANS INCLUDING REV, EMMANUEL OBASOHAN, THE MAYOR OF BARKING AND DAGENHAM AND MS EKI OGBEIDE, DIRECTOR OF EDO STATE WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION ON THE 16TH OF AUGUST 2008, IN LONDON, UK AT CONTELLATION RESTAURANT, GRANGE HOTEL, 50 – 60 SOUTHAMPTON ROW, LONDON WC1B 4AR.

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