Executive summary

The main aim of the paper is to explore, examine and assess the decade(s) long conflict in Nigeria with special reference to the conflict in Niger delta. Nigeria with its 140 million inhabitants is the most populous country in Africa. It is situated north of the Gulf of Guinea, and borders Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. The country was under the British colonial rule and gained its independence in 1960. However the democratic government and system so formed was overthrown in 1966 and the power was taken by the military followed by the Biafra civil war. Since then the state of Nigeria has been politically unstable as the power kept on changing from military to civil rule or vice versa for instance in 1979 and finally in 1999 ‘democracy’ was restored. As far as the demographic structure of the state is concerned there are numerous ethnic groups with two main religions i.e. Islam and Christianity. The northern part of the country is dominated by Muslims and southern by Christians. These features make Nigeria a country inhabited by people belonging to diversified groups and sharing minimum common characteristics. Adding to this as far as the political structure of the country is concerned; Nigeria follows a federal system with different state governments and a centralized government. This characteristic of the Nigerian state is found to be quite important for this study and discussed in the later section of this paper. (Gonzalez; 2010)
As far as the conflicts are concerned, ever since the post Biafra civil war (1967) period the country has been found trapped into one or the other conflict(s). However the conflict(s) have taken place at different time and at different place within the state territory but all these conflicts with cause and consequences cannot be distinguished alone and independent rather they are connected to each other and can be put on a timeline. The conflicts in Nigeria can be categorized into three forms. Firstly the conflicts arising out of the political crisis i.e. the clashes between state and local ethnic groups or intra ethnic groups. The second form can be classified as the conflict between the religious groups i.e. the Muslims and Christians, since 1980 these types of conflicts have become more often. The most important and last classified form of conflict and violence erupting out of it is in the Niger delta in the southern part of the country. The territory of Niger delta consisting of nine states is rich in crude oil and found to be of prime importance as far as studying and connecting the various conflicts in the country. Since the past two decades the ‘oil conflict’ in Niger delta has become acute and gathers the attention at both national and international level. The conflict is mainly circled around the revenue generated through the crude oil business. There are multinational oil corporations who have been extracting oil from the area since 1970’s. Over the period of time some ethnic groups have been into continuous conflict with other groups and state (including oil corporations). The other factors adding to the conflict are mismanagement of the resources (crude oil) by the state, high level of corruption, environmental degradation due to oil extraction, unemployment and low level of per capita income. With this overview and understanding the present conflict map tries to unearth the petroleum conflict in the Niger delta and aspects related to it with reference period of the last two decades (from 1990’s to 2011). For this purpose the following part of the paper discusses the conceptual framework and thoughts on which the present conflict map is based, the overall course of the conflict and several parties involved, the consequences of the conflict, the peace efforts and initiatives and then the conclusion. (Gonzalez; 2010, Rustad; 2008, Smock; 2009, Oviasuyi & Uwadiae; 2010)

**Conceptual framework**

From the colonial period there have been diversities in Nigeria not in just terms of different sets of people (ethnic groups) with different socio economic conditions, but also in terms of ‘progress and development’. This trend continued in the post colonial period also as there were clear divisions found in the degrees of development of north and south.

At one side Niger delta is extremely rich in natural resources viz. oil and gas which is a main source of income for the country but on the other hand the region performs poorly on the socio economic indicators of development like health, employment, infrastructure, education etc. as compared to other regions or states in the country. After several years of independence also the area had remained neglected as compared to the other parts and the majority of people in Niger delta remain poor and sidelined.

The degree of discontent in the people can be understood from the fact that in the region of big oil corporations they feel sidelined and not getting the due importance and share and feel like living in the “stone age”, and also bearing the ‘costs’ of oil extraction in the form of health and environment degradation (Oviasuyi & Uwadiae; 2010).

In this whole scenario it can be argued that the region is found trapped in the vicious cycle of ‘poverty-conflict-under development’. Due to prolonged poverty and exploitation at the cost of the ‘others or outsiders’ there developed a feeling of discontent among the people against the oil corporations and state, which led to the prolonged conflict, both non violent and more times violent. Connecting the vicious cycle
this leads to diverting the funds to the peace restoration and conflict management through military or other means, from other socio economic development projects. Adding to this the other cost of conflict like environmental degradation, political disintegration, human resource loss etc. have added to the situation and further worsened the condition of the people in Niger delta. With this type of long conflict and tensions even the development efforts, however if any becomes sidelined and undermined.

According to this thought and framework it becomes clear that however there could be numerous reasons for the petroleum conflict in the area but due to all this the common people in the Niger delta are trapped in this vicious cycle of poverty ridden conflict and under development.

Seeing from another perspective, as mentioned in the above part of the paper also it is important to understand about the federal structure of government in Nigeria. The territory of the country is divided into several states with their own governments and there is also centre government. This kind of federal structure is said to benefit the states formed on the basis of different ethnic groups, as being a separate federal state as ideally they have a better say as compared to the totally centralized system. But in practice it has been observed in Nigeria the central regime (mostly military) has indirectly controlled the affairs of the state, for example appointing the ‘loyal’ head of the state or amending laws in the constitution so that the central power can easily bypass the state government decisions. As far as the natural resources and revenue from them is concerned the authority lies in the hand of central power, as in the case of Niger delta also the oil revenue goes to federal account and then is redistributed among different states. However this system of sharing has always caused a chaos and added to the conflict as Niger delta has always demanded a greater share in the oil revenue while as northern states have always been opposing them. In the present scenario this kind of federal structure has not brought any fruits in the Niger delta region but on the other hand has lead to an easy access of central government to the resources (petroleum and gas) in the region. (Rustad; 2008)

A strong argument is given by number of scholars against the functioning of this so called federal system and has lead to the mismanagement of conflict with the failure to find a resolution. (Rustad; 2008, Gonzalez; 2010)

Course of the conflict and actors/parties involved

The petroleum conflict in the region is not recent but a recognizable initiation point can be traced back in the 1990 when the writer and the activist Ken Saro Wiwa protested against the state and oil corporations blaming them and their policies for the bad condition of the region. He also initiated a movement called as Movement for the survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP). This is regarded as one of the first united uprising against the state. But the state reaction to this uprising and protest has been shocking. In the regime of General Sani Abacha (military leader) ‘peace keeping’ forces were sent to the region and with the name of controlling the conflict and restoring peace they killed Ken Saro Wiwa with eight other Ogoni activist in year 1995. This was majorly done to suppress the movement and so that the oil business which got affected could continue. Following this incident there was an increase in number of groups (ethnic) that began to emerge to fight against the state and oil corporations. For instance in 1999 Isoko youths, an ethnic group belonging to Niger delta forcibly shut down five Shell’s (an oil corporation) extraction pumps. In the recent years numerous ethnic armed groups have grown in the region some of which have been highly violent such as People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). They have been majorly responsible for illegal oil bunkering, kidnapping oil corporation officials especially foreign nationals, car bombs, disrupting oil pumping stations. Adding to this there have been other recognized movements in the delta region such as Movement of the Survival of the Ijaw (an Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta), the Ijaw National Congress, the Ijaw Youth Council, the Itsekiri General Assembly, the Urhobo Union and the Chikoko Movement. By forming these armed groups and organizing movements several minorities and ethnic groups belonging to different
states of Niger delta have been trying to mark their presence and voice. Also there have been intra ethnic conflicts among several groups so formed to gain the mileage over one another.

Therefore in this aspect the main actors or the parties involved in the conflict can be divided into three groups viz. the state, the multinational oil corporations and several ethnic groups. In this conflict the state and oil corporations appears to be on the same side, as the ruling regimes in Nigeria have always tried to suppress the uprising and violence against the oil corporations. It can also be argued that the oil corporations have been acting as ‘agents of west’ as they have been working to fulfill the petroleum needs of western countries. These groups of countries headed by U.S.A can be termed as third party having an indirect role in this conflict; this argument can be supported by the fact that Nigeria serves as a major source for U.S.A. for its petroleum needs and is currently the fourth largest exporter to U.S.A. (Davis; 2009, Davis, Kemedi & Drennan; Unknown)

Consequences of the conflict

In this prolonged more violent and less non violent conflict there have been huge material as well as human resource losses in the region. As an estimate there are about 1000 people killed every year. The armed forces have kidnapped several oil officials, mostly foreign nationals, some of them have been freed after negotiations but some of them have been killed also. This has forwarded a negative message in the international arena and has added to political disintegration of the area. The conflict and violence has not solved the problem of corruption and mismanagement in the system indeed it has become more acute. The ‘illegal oil trade’ from the oil theft through broken pipelines, connections using the power of gun has become common in the area. This has badly harmed the Nigerian economy as the ‘legal production’ of the oil over the period of time has gone down. This has resulted in complete system failure in the region. It has a political link also the ‘rebels’ or the ‘goons’ are used by the politically active people against the state and sometimes other ethnic groups to gain a political mileage. In some cases it was found that the parallel illegal oil trade is supported or indirectly run by the elites, people having political strength and sometimes having close links with military officials. Under the umbrella of state those people have an advantage in a conflict situation so that they can easily do these types of activities.

Thus it becomes clear that the huge losses are incurred both by the state and people of the region, a part of it is estimated and the major part cannot be. (Smock;2008, Davis; 2009, Davis, Kemedi & Drennan Unknown

Peace efforts and initiatives

The oil crisis and conflict in the Niger delta calls for peace initiatives by the different stake holders viz. the state (both central and state government), the ethnic rebellion groups, the international oil corporations. However the role of non government organizations (NGO’s) and civil society is any becomes much more important in cases like this. To assess and comment
upon the effectiveness of the peace process and dialogue it is necessary to uncover the initiatives taken in the past, which have been discussed in the following part.

The initiatives taken by the federal government:

1. In 1993, the federal government of Nigeria established the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in line with the recommendations of The Belgore Commission. OMPADEC suffered from lack of planning and collapsed leaving numerous unfinished projects. Eventually, OMPADEC failed to solve the problems in the Niger-Delta Region, thereby necessitating the need for the federal government to return to the drawing table in order to improve the situation.

2. In 2000, the federal government established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) amidst opposition from activists in the region that the commission would not be accountable to the communities, and would suffer from mismanagement and corruption. Some Niger-Delta residents are already criticizing the NDDC, while the commission’s staff had been complaining of inadequate funding. In 2004, NDDC prepared a Draft Master-Plan for the region, which was estimated to cost US$2.9 billion over a fifteen year period. Unfortunately, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) rejected NDDC and criticized the commission on the grounds that it is: “a channel for further looting of the meager sums of money allocated to the development of the Niger-Delta Region”

3. In 2009, the federal government established the Ministry of Niger Delta to handle the infrastructural development of the region. So far and unfortunately too, adequate financial allocation has not been made to the ministry and the implications of this is that the ministry may fail woefully like its predecessors if adequate fund is not given to it. (Oviasuyi & Uwadiae; 2010)

The above mentioned efforts have not delivered up to their expectations and can be regarded as a failure as in post 1993 period (the setting up of first institution to sort out the matter) the conflict has grew further and became more and more violent and started involving more and more people from larger areas. As far as the two main rebel or militia groups i.e. MEND and NDPVF are concerned a mutual peace agreement in 2008 containing the following points have been agreed upon between government and them:

“MEND leadership has agreed to demobilize and abide by an international disarmament program if it can reach agreement with the government on an agenda for formal peace discussions. MEND would disarm in three stages. First MEND forces would relinquish light weapons, then heavy weapons, and finally their surface-to-air capability. Disarmament and weapons destruction would be tied to the demobilization and integration of the militia back into community life. MEND has undertaken to guarantee a complete cessation of all militia activity including activity by non-MEND militia units. This would not extend to criminal activity such as bank robberies, which MEND says is unrelated to militia and is a local policing matter. In the interest of public safety, the Federal Government of Nigeria will match military withdrawal with the increases in police wages, training, orientation, equipment and improvements in police living conditions. This will assist in moving Nigeria from a military regime to a true democracy with a civilian government.” (Davis; 2009)

Following this and recognizing the past failures the government has set up Niger Delta Ministry to focus on the process of delivering improved infrastructure and development in the region. (Davis; 2009) This is seen as a welcome step taken by the state as after a long period of conflict the peace initiative directly talks about the core problem of the conflict i.e. the lack of progress, growth and development in the region.
The role of the multinational oil corporations has not been so encouraging. Although they have been funding and implementing several ‘development’ projects in the area, but most of them have not bought significant result. The problem of rent seeking has also been found in the development plans of oil corporations. They are familiar with the problem of unemployment and environmental degradation which are key reasons for the conflict but there is hardly any serious step taken by them to solve those issues. (Davis; 2009, )

Adding to this the stand of NGO’s and civil society have been very weak and hardly found making any impact. Also their effect has been limited to ethnic groups, local churches etc. (Davis; 2009)

Conclusion

The petroleum crisis in the Niger delta leading to conflict which has been prevalent for a long period of time had produced devastating results for the region and the country itself. In the global era the region seems to be sidelined with minimum efforts of development and currently facing the serious environmental, social and economic problems. The region is very important for the international community as it is extremely rich in natural resources and the problem calls for sustainable development for the betterment of every stake holder. Through this debate it can be argued that the key to solving the issue is breaking the chain of “poverty-conflict-underdevelopment”. Currently the situation in the region is stable with cease fire, but the problem of corruption, unemployment and inflation is becoming more and more severe, the recent example of this can be traced to the recent ‘petroleum riots’ and violence over the shoot in petroleum prices. Here the whole policy and governmental structure seems to be failing, this incidents leaves unanswered questions about the future of the ‘oil conflict’ in Niger delta.

References