

**Reducing Small Arms,
Increasing Safety and Security
and Minimising Conflicts
in the Niger Delta Region**

*A survey of the
Small Arms Light Weapons Situation of the Delta*

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**REDUCING SMALL ARMS,
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IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION**
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BY JOEL BISINA
June 2003

**FOUNDER/REGIONAL COORDINATOR, NIDPRODEV, WARRI
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“Nigerians should know that it is only a matter of time before one by one they are shot down either directly or as victims of stray bullets. For the International community, it is only a matter of time before firearms imported into the Niger Delta for the purpose of inter-ethnic wars and political thuggery will find their way into other parts of the country.”

-Ms. Alice Ukoko, Lawyer and Human Right Activist

ABSTRACT

Until very recently international focus on the Niger Delta has been on how to pacify the multi-ethnic indigenous communities, to allow the giant oil multinationals from Europe and America explore and exploit the bounteous oil minerals resource of the region.

But as the years rolled by and events after events began to show that the agitations by these communities were assuming a more violent posture with the seizure of oil platforms, hostage taking and forced closure of strategic oil export terminals, the region became marked for special observation.

Today, the so branded restive youths have adorned a new toga. Terms such as militants, armed youths, ethnic militias and private political armies now frequently occur when the Niger Delta crisis comes up for debate.

In this discourse we shall be looking at the role of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in today's Niger Delta conflicts because in all the reported incidents of violent conflicts the actors have used arms. How did these arms get here and how do we rid the streets, creeks and swamps and forests of these SALW? Find out.

BACKGROUND

Since the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) ended the Nigerian populace has had to contend with the problem of proper demobilization of armed personnel, most of who joined the armed forces rather casually and did not remain in the system to pursue a career in the military. A lot of the demobilized soldiers walked home with some arms and ammunitions concealed in their kits. It was more or less a self-awarded souvenir and therefore a treasure to the many ex-service men fondly called 'old soldiers'.

But by the mid 1970s when the menace of armed robbery held the nation by the jugular, accusing fingers were pointed at these 'old sols'. The logic was that since they went home, the crime rate had soared and petty stealing at night had gradually given way to daylight robbery by men armed with guns traceable to the war fronts. In recent years, the presence of arms in non-military hands appears to have reached a most alarming rate, along with social discontent and economic deprivations, especially during the military rule and the unending political transition programs.

In the Niger Delta, youths agitating for a fair share of the oil resources have taken up arms against no one in particular but against anything that has the semblance of marginalisation or that is remotely connected to oppression and social injustice.

DEPTH OF THE PROBLEM

Proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta can best be appreciated if one takes a look at some of the most recent conflicts in which light weapons featured prominently.

The use of SALW no doubt has sustained inter-ethnic conflicts like the triangular wars amongst the Ijaw, Itsekiri and the Urhobo in the Warri area. Consequently, the violence has refused to abate and on its trail are the thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and a roll call of innocent persons and combatants who fell in the numerous battles fought by armed local militia groups.

Between 1997 and 2003, a space of about six years, Delta State has become one of the most volatile areas in the region, and has witnessed violent armed conflicts. Notable among them are:

1. **Ijaw/Itsekiri crises:** More than 300 persons are said to have lost their lives, several hundred injured and some missing in the last six years of this conflict. Well over twenty-eight (28) communities have been completely wiped out and thousands of individuals have been rendered homeless. These conflicts were prosecuted using SALW. Modern communication gadgets, satellite phones, radio communications and fast moving speed boats have equally been used by these combatants.
2. **Ijaws/Ilajes crisis:** In the conflict involving the Itsekelewu / Opuama communities of Warri North L.G.A, Delta State and the Ilaje group of Ondo State the story was the same. More than 50 persons died.
3. **Itsekiris/Urhobos:** In Warri South L.G.A, well over 20 persons died and properties worth millions of naira were destroyed in a chain of conflicts over some disputed lands and struggles over political representation, said to be lopsided against one ethnic group.
4. **The Uvwie crises:** Just last month, no fewer than 20 persons died in Effurun following armed conflict between supporters of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and supporters of the rival party Alliance for Democracy (AD).

5. **P.T.I Mayhem:** In March 2002 a political rally organized by the PDP degenerated into a violent clash between students of the Petroleum Training Institute and some party thugs. It was a case where a party stalwart allegedly brought in arms from a nearby armory and distributed to party thugs who inflicted serious injuries on the students and damage to school properties. The students were only peacefully asking the state governor to pay them a bursary award which they considered a legitimate entitlement.
6. **Evwreni internal crisis:** In this crisis, a traditional ruler was beheaded, several others killed and quite a number of people injured, including policemen.
7. **Ogulagha/Odimodi Crisis (2001):** Two rival communities fought over the ownership of the Forcados terminal operated by Shell Petroleum Development Company, but in a bid to adequately arm themselves one of the groups procured an explosive device. In the course of testing the device, about 10 persons were allegedly blown up in an accidental explosion.
8. **Kwale Utagba-ogbe/Beneku (1999).**
9. **Oleh/Olomoro crisis (2000).**
10. **Ojobo Intra communal conflict (2002).**
11. **The Ugborodo Intra:** The last general elections took close to 20 lives in Delta State alone. SALW were also used for criminal tendencies.

On May 29, 2003, four men of the operation fire squad of the Nigerian police were cut down by robbers who disguised themselves in military uniform and shot down the policemen at a checking point.

It might be of interest to note that no fewer 10-security personnel have been killed while performing internal peacekeeping operations in various parts of the state.

At least one thousand persons have lost their lives, some thousands injured and others maimed for life. Properties worth millions of naira and entire communities completely wiped out. This has resulted in serious humanitarian crisis.

From the foregoing, it is safe and clear to conclude that SALW are used to prosecute inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, communal, conflicts. Politicians have also procured arms both for self-defense and to settle political scores. Also criminals use them regularly to perpetuate their criminal activities.

ACTORS AND ACTRESSES AND THE MOTIVATION FOR POSSESSION

Listed below are the major players in the SALW:

- The youths
- The community leaders
- The traditional rulers
- Ex-servicemen
- Politicians/elites
- Organised ethnic militias
- Organized ethnic organizations
- Serving security personnel
- Vigilantes and neighbourhood watch groups
- The Oil Companies
- Criminals and armed robbers
- Illicit businessmen and illegal bunkerers

Their interest and motivation in possessing arms largely depend on their socio-economic status, political leaning and personal conviction about events or happenings around them.

Youths, community leaders, traditional rulers, ethnic militias and organised ethnic organizations are lured into the arms build up to prosecute ethnic wars and fight perceived enemies. This was clearly the case in the lingering Warri crisis. In the words of a youth leader, “we acquire guns so that we can defend our father land”.

Ex servicemen, youths, serving security personnel get involved for economic objectives. The survival instinct and greed are the compelling forces. Youths are largely unemployed in the delta. In all the communities our team visited, there was always a large army of unemployed youths who roam the streets aimlessly. They find ready income in serving as private civilian mercenaries.

Investigations revealed that some youths get paid as much as N10,000 per day for participating in inter ethnic conflict in and around Warri. The same was the situation with those youths who surrendered their services to politicians as thugs during the last elections.

Ex- and serving security personnel participate because they have families to take care of and their pensions and remunerations that are very small are not regularly paid. In the words of a member of the Nigerian Legion of Ex servicemen...”look at me now a retired General, I cannot cry. I did not steal money. I’ve done what I can do for this country and rely on my pension, but as I am talking with you now, five months, I have not been paid my pension and I have no other business. What do you want me to do now”? This is the sorry situation of military pensioners in the country.

Other motivations for using these weapons included the fact that they are portable, as well as easy to use and conceal from security checks. “You can put it anywhere now, you can put it under your seat, in the boot, water does not even affect its performance,” revealed an ex-combatant.

TYPES AND APPROXIMATE MARKET VALUE

In the course of this survey, attempts were made to find out the approximate cost of some of these SALW commonly in use in the Delta. Find below some revealing statistics¹.

TYPE	PRICE ₦
AK 47	120,000
Pump Action	80,000
Bazooka	240,000-300,000
F N Rifle	100,000
Uzi	120,000
SLR (self loading rifle)	100,000
Sub Machine Gun	70,000
Locally made Pistol	20,000-30,000
Single Barrel Gun	50,000
Double Barrel	70,000
Hand Grenade	N/A
Mark 4, Mark 3	N/A

¹ Source: Prominent community leader

Sources and Availability

Our investigation revealed that arms proliferation is on the rise in the region. Within Warri alone, you can get quite a large quantity of weapons. In the words of a community leader, “you need not go too far in Warri to get whatever quantity you want”. The bulk of the arms and weapons in Delta come from neighbouring countries in the West African Sub Region. Our findings revealed that SALW comes in from neighbouring countries such as:

1. Sierra Leone
2. Liberia
3. Cameroon
4. Guinea Bissau
5. Cote d’Ivoire
6. Ghana

The major sources of these weapons in West Africa sub region are the stock pile of SALW that were dumped into Africa in the 1970s and 1980s by the defunct Soviet Union, the USA and their allies to fan proxy interstate wars.²

Internal sources include leftovers from the civil wars in Bakassi Peninsula, Middle belt region, Lagos and Eastern states particularly Awka in Anambra State. There are also local blacksmiths that produce in and around Warri.

Other sources include

- Arms imported by multinational oil companies.
- Soldiers returning from peacekeeping duties in neighbouring West African countries.
- Weapons carelessly dumped in armories in military barracks or pilfered by security agents.
- Security personnel posted to the Niger Delta region to keep the peace also indulge in hiring out their weapons to criminals and ethnic militias.
- Arms sold to private individuals who have official security personnel posted to their houses and business premises. Most of the time these weapons are unaccounted for and fraudulent and dubious security personnel divert such weapons to private use.
- Security personnel posted to banks or on escort duties.

How do these SALW find their way into the Delta? This is an important question raised with all we had an interview with. The discovery here was that the dealers deliver to destination. You pay them and tell them where to deliver and they bring them to your doorstep.

Sometimes, security personnel help to convey arms to convenient places where they can easily be moved by the beneficiaries to their armory. This is done with siren blowing escort vans and armed security operatives on board to beat any checkpoint on the way.

Cross border consignments are ferried through the sea and dumped in the creeks through illegal waterways. Sometimes SALW are concealed in large trucks and containers and are conveyed from one point to another.

² *Abdel-Fatau Musah; Small ARMS: A Time Bomb under West Africa’s Democratization Process*

Illegal dealers through ships bring in consignments of illicit SALW from Arab countries, Europe and America. Local traffickers and smugglers move in with fast boats into the high seas and off load into their boats which are supplied to waiting community leaders and private individuals for safe keeping in the community armory.

Regarding the quantity available, there is no way of knowing the actual quantity in circulation; however it is estimated that no fewer than 200,000 SALW are in wrong hands in Delta State. The world estimate puts the total number of SALW in circulation at 500 million. Of this figure seven million are said to be in West Africa.³ At least 500,000 are in Nigeria.

THE CAPACITY OF THE SECURITY AGENCIES TO CONTROL, SEIZE AND COLLECT

Military authorities at the 7th Amphibious Battalion, Effurun, said: “the army has the capacity to crush any uprising and ethnic conflicts, collect arms in illegal hands, but we are constrained by the fact that the issues generating the conflict are political and require a political solution. Any attempt at launching full scale military operations aimed at retrieving arms will be bloody.” They debunked the claim that the youths have more modern weapons than the military. According to them, the army has long-range weapons that can go as far as three kilometers, which they believe, may not be available to the youths.

But, Maj. Gen. David Ejoor seems to differ a bit from this position. Although Ejoor does not doubt the capability of the army, he believes, the terrain makes it difficult for any meaningful disarmament program to be carried out. In his words; “If a ship berths around the Escravos area now, then a barge goes in there and collects what it wants to collect there and by the time it is finished, the consignments are transferred into small boats and they sail into the villages in the creeks and the swamps, how does the soldier trace it? The one that came from Togo through Seme, into Lagos or the ones that come through Niger Republic into Sokoto and the rest of those places. How do you control them?... You should understand that the entry points are many, besides many of the routes are secret too. So it is not easy to say you catch those involved in illegal arms trafficking along our borders”.

The Police Public Relations Officer of the state says the police are relatively incapacitated because they are not getting the desired cooperation from the members of the public, whom he accused of not coming up with information about arms locations and the activities of criminals.

Apart from the difficulty posed by the terrain there is also the problem of tracing the way and manner arms are kept. Most communities have local armories that are located outside the communities. A mere raid on a community could be an exercise in futility as arms in private hands are less than 10% of the total arms stockpiled by the communities in secret armories.

A private soldier at a check point was very frank when he said “*why should I trouble myself with where they carry arms to, as far as them give me my cut, after all, how much army they pay me way I wan kill myself abi na me be Jesus Christ wey go die for this country, God forbid*”!!!

From the foregoing there appears to be a lack of necessary incentive and motivation for the security operatives to vigorously pursue a disarmament process through and through.

³ *Abdel-Fatau Musah, Africa :The Political Economy of Small Arms and Conflict.*

THE ROLE OF CSOs AND NON-CSOs

Civil society organizations and non-civil society organizations may play dual roles in SALW proliferation, circulation and trafficking. Ethnic based organizations have greatly fueled the fracas through active participation in arms build-up process.

I found out that during the height of Gen Sanni Abacha's administration, some ethnic organizations established training camps, and were preparing some youths for rebellious activities. These organizations were funded by the Western super powers. Investigation further revealed that some of the weapons in use in recent crises are part of those weapons acquired by the ethnic organizations.

Our discussion with most women in the creeks and in the cities revealed that they (mothers) are not happy about the development But most of them find themselves in helpless situations as they seem to have lost control of their wards who are used to prosecuting these battles by money bags and self-styled opinion leaders who try to brainwash and pretend to be helping to create political space and economic base for them.

COMBATING THE USERS

The number and the intensity of armed conflicts have significantly increased in the Niger Delta in general and Delta State in particular in recent years. As a result of this violence, the social and economic development of the region has been significantly impacted, laments chief Okpako Rukewve, a Chief in Oleh.

In view of the wanton destruction of lives and properties occasioned by possession and use of SALW, it becomes imperative for a comprehensive programme of disarmament, demobilization and re – integration (DDR) to be launched. It is essential that programmes to collect, manage and destroy SALW be part of a comprehensive approach to restore peace and stability in areas affected by conflict. Reducing the prevalence of SALW will provide very real alternatives to violence through livelihood opportunities combined with an improved security and human rights environment.

If those efforts and processes are not well managed, they could jeopardize an entire peace building effort. Regrettably, efforts by the Nigerian Army to combat these armed civilians have not yielded the desired results. Instead, the same military personnel have paid the supreme sacrifice for daring to combat these users of SALW.

Peace building effort should not stop at just signing a peace accord or communiqué but, disarmament, demobilization and re- integration should be a component part of such initiatives.

Practical Steps to be Taken Include:

1. Massive media campaign on the dangers, the threat to peace, security and development possession and use of small arms and light weapons pose to society.
2. Community based education; training and enlightenment programmes should be organized for traditional rulers, youth organizations and opinion leaders on the dangers of possessing and trafficking in SALW. Youths should be brought to the point of realization that the biro (education) is mightier than the gun as suggested by a traditional ruler, The Pere of Egbema Kingdom.
3. Workshops, conferences, seminars and symposia should be organized for politicians and public office holders of the region on the dangers of arms stockpiling and the politics of thuggery.

4. Deliberate effort should be made to address the political question in Warri. That is the three Warri Local Government Areas of Warri North, South and South – west. “Let us balance the political equation” as suggested by the President, Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC).
5. The Niger Delta Region should be de-militarized. The number of armed security personnel in the creeks, rivers and our communities should be reduced to the barest minimum. According to Chief Oweipade Glasgow a community leader and an ex-serviceman, “The militarization of the Niger Delta under the pretext of protecting oil installations and checking activities of vandals and illegal bunkering is a deception of the highest order. It is not arms used by hungry and poorly paid security personnel that secures oil installations, but instead a mutually beneficial relationship. Oil companies and government should seek ways of strengthening the relationship with their host communities. We see ourselves as a people at war when we continue to see fierce looking armed security personnel patrol our waterways, harassing, abusing and dehumanizing our people. There is the natural tendency to acquire arms, if not for anything but to defend and protect our heritage, given to us by God”.
6. In the words of Major General David Ejoor (Rtd), “First of all you will have to put in a government that will stop the necessity and greed of buying weapons. We need to change the unitary political system in the country, which has turned the normal political process to politics of money, distributing supposedly elective positions on a cash and carry basis.”
7. Government business should be conducted with a high level of responsibility and transparency, and be made accountable to the people, not to families, communal, sectional or ethnic interests.
8. The buy back and voluntary surrender for money and development that seem to have recorded some level of success in El Salvador and Albania could be adopted here. This could be complemented with skills development, scholarship and employment opportunities for youths or actors who willingly surrender arms. Late Evangelist J.O.C Mosheshe, worried by the growing wave of armed robbery and crime in Agbarho, Ughelli and parts of Effurun in 1986 – 1987, single handedly initiated a rehabilitation programme for armed robbers who repented and surrendered their arms. The programme, according to Rev Emuoboghare Odesirinefe, recorded some level of success at that time. It helped to reduce the crime rate in the affected areas. This approach was later implemented at Ewreni by same Late Evangelist, which helped to bring under control the Ewreni internal crisis that led to the beheading of a traditional ruler and death of several youths and policemen.
9. Training of security personnel must emphasize adherence to human rights and responsible use of weapons.
10. The public should be willing to co – operate by providing information to the relevant security agencies. Also the relevant security agencies should be willing to provide protection to members of the public who provide information on the location of arms.
11. Pensions, entitlements and salaries of ex – service and serving security operatives should be paid promptly and regularly reviewed.
12. Border patrols should be strengthened and modern communications and detective devices should be provided to security operatives.

13. Regular raids should be carried out, targeted at suspected persons no matter how highly placed. According to military authorities at 7th Amphibious Battalion Effurun, in one of the inter-ethnic crises in Warri, some houses belonging to some prominent persons were raided and some arms were recovered, an indication that these persons could know something about the arms on the streets.
14. Efforts should be made to promote structures and processes that strengthen democracy, human rights, rule of law and good governance as well as economic recovery and growth as a means of eliminating conflicts and guaranteeing durable peace.
15. At the national level, government should make an effort to seek cooperation with nations to ensure implementation and commitment to agreements, protocols, conventions such as the ECOWAS MORATORIUM, the Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Fire arms, Ammunition, explosives and the Bamako Declaration on an Africa common position on the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons.

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