

## Oil jihad in the Niger delta?

**Bronwen Manby**

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*Record world oil prices are raising rumours of jihad in the Niger delta. But the conflict in Nigeria's oil-producing heartland is more complex and localised than this suggests, says a human rights researcher who has met the rebel leader "Mujahid" Asari Dokubo.*

In a world where western media jump on any sign of a "war on terror", a lot can ride on a name. "Mujahid" Asari Dokubo, the self-described rebel leader in the Niger delta, was until recently plain "Alhaji" Asari Dokubo. The "Mujahid" tag appears to be part of an effort to focus international attention, however briefly, on this neglected region of West Africa. But the real story is different from the geopolitical eruption that it suggests.

Asari Dokubo's activities halted production of just 30,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil. By comparison, violence during the period of national and state elections in Nigeria in April 2003 closed down 800,000 bpd –40% of daily output. The international media interest in the future of Nigerian oil production at that time was far lower.

Dokubo is the sort of man who arrives for a meeting with a human rights researcher like me in a Mercedes Benz, accompanied by four beefy young men wearing black T-shirts and aviator sunglasses; and then talks convincingly and with passion about his commitment to self-determination for the Niger delta (when I met him in 2001, he also claimed – less convincingly - to be committed to non-violent methods).

He converted to Islam as a student, an unusual step for the son of a judge from a region of Nigeria that has very few indigenous Muslims. He claims no role for Islam in his current activities, and few if any of his supporters are fellow-Muslims.

How much support does Asari Dokubo have? Certainly, there is widespread backing in the delta for many the sentiments he expresses, and in particular for the right of the people living in the oil-producing areas to claim control of "their" oil. The level of anger at the absence of anything to show for decades of oil production – except pollution and five-star hotels – is hard to overstate. Personally, I have only seen anger at that level in one other place and time: in South Africa before the end of apartheid. The anger here is similarly rooted in the coexistence of endemic poverty alongside great wealth for a small elite.

There is also quite substantial support in the Niger delta for the articulation of self-determination as a *violent* struggle. The "elected" politicians of the delta have zero credibility or support except among those who can expect to gain from their kleptocracy. Even the very modest hopes that people had of the civilian government installed in 1999 have been dashed, and

the experience of 2003 is that the ballot-box is useless as a way of removing the politicians who have performed so poorly. For many, violence is the next logical step.

### Injustice, violence and the spoils

When I met him in 2001 Dokubo had staged something of a coup in taking over the leadership of the Ijaw Youth Council. The IYC was established in late 1998, as a sixteen-year period of military rule was nearing its end in Nigeria. Its aim was to mobilise the widespread anger felt among the young men of the Niger delta's largest ethnic group – one fragmented by the creeks that criss-cross the mangrove forests among which its people live – to demand a better deal from the incoming civilian government and from the oil companies.

In particular, the IYC demanded “resource control” – that is, that the oil companies should account first to the communities where they operated rather than negotiating deals with a federal government which has shown itself unwilling to pass on the benefits. The IYC was inspired at least in part by the example of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (Mosop). Saro-Wiwa, executed by the military regime in 1995, is a hero across the delta for closing down Shell's production in the small section of Rivers State occupied by the Ogoni people.

Asari Dokubo claims also to admire both Nelson Mandela and Osama bin Laden – the latter for standing up to the “arrogance of the west”, just as the people of the delta should stand up to the arrogance of the Nigerian federal government. In addition, he says he has undergone guerrilla training outside the country.

It was the new governor of Rivers State, Peter Odili, who sponsored Dokubo's 2001 “coup”. Odili had been deeply threatened by the attempt to create a genuine political movement uniting the many clans of the Ijaw, and he engineered a split between the founders of the IYC and a faction led by Dokubo. Dokubo was close to Odili during the time of widespread violence and intimidation in the delta leading up to the latter's re-election in 2003 – though describing the 2003 polls as an “election” in any part of the delta would be a distortion of reality. After what became popularly known as the “selections”, Odili dropped his former protégé, and Dokubo adopted the language of armed resistance.

In military terms, Dokubo's control of territory is largely confined to his home area of the Kalabari clan, a relatively small section of the riverine part of Rivers State. But he can call on the services of at least several hundred young men (he claims several thousand) from across Ijaw territory. He also has a serious armoury at his disposal: not just the standard AK47s that are easily available to the smallest local gang-leader, but general purpose machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades.

He obtained the weapons using profits from the theft of crude oil direct from the oil companies' pipelines, and via the assistance of similar militia groups operating in Delta State in the western delta. By all accounts, there is also significant leakage of weaponry from the Nigerian armed forces. Weapons no longer needed for active hostilities in Liberia or Sierra Leone find their way along the West African coast; and arms dealers will sell wherever they find a market.

Dokubo is not alone in stealing oil, a practice known as “illegal oil bunkering”, which can involve the loss of up to 10% of Nigeria's daily production, worth several million dollars a day. The fights over territory in order to control the trade are common, and increasingly militarised (see *The Warri Crisis: fuelling violence*). Those accused of involvement in the bunkering trade include senior politicians and state officials at both state and federal level; the editor of a magazine detailing such allegations has been charged with sedition and criminal defamation (see *Nigeria: renewed crackdown on freedom of expression*).

### The path to disaster

The Nigerian military have been deployed in force to suppress Dokubo's Niger Delta Peoples' Volunteer Force (NDPVF, echoing the name of a group that led a short-lived 1966 uprising whose leader Isaac Boro has a park named after him in the Rivers State capital, Port Harcourt). Access to the area being contested is limited, but the navy has destroyed several villages with the support of military helicopters, and up to several hundred people may have been killed. Others have been caught in the crossfire between the NDPVF and an equally well-armed rival militia led by one Ateke Tom, who has the favour of the state government.

Among his Kalabari people, Dokubo may well be blamed for bringing this vengeance upon them; but in

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the wider delta the military's tactics are certain to increase support for Dokubo and those like him who articulate a rejection of the federal government and are willing to fight for local control over oil resources.

The "Mujahid" has used this base level of support to portray himself as a principled rebel leader fighting for the rights of the delta people, and to focus national and international media attention on his situation in order to reduce his chances of being obliterated on his home territory. This strategy has been successful, leading to meetings between Dokubo and high-level oil company delegations and even Nigeria's president, Olusegun Obasanjo. It also suits the Rivers State government to echo Dokubo's shift of language, as this moves attention away from his previous status as a creature of the governor and justifies its own military response.

What, then, are the long-term implications for the Niger delta of this latest confrontation? At one level, this is just another messy small war in a region that has been marked by increasing violence for more than a decade. Even the disruption to oil supplies is relatively small - though it brought attention to the delta by contributing to the increase in prices to over \$50 a barrel.

Nonetheless, the fighting marks yet another escalation in conflict, and for the first time serious casualties have been inflicted on the outskirts of Port Harcourt itself, where Dokubo's followers have been implicated in recent weeks in fighting in which scores of people have died. Unless urgent action is taken to address some of the basic demands of which Dokubo is the current spokesperson - essentially that the oil must benefit more than a few - the situation is likely to deteriorate and militia like his may take control over much wider areas of the delta.

Action to prevent this must include measures to control the spread of small arms and reduce the theft of oil. Even more important, there must be an all-out effort to reduce the diversion of the government's oil revenues from public goods into private pockets; and to ensure that the 2007 elections have some measure of legitimacy, making it possible for the Ijaw and others living in the delta to hope for change through the ballot-box rather than the bullet.

The current trajectory, one driven by the industrialised world's greed for oil, seems far more likely to reduce the Niger delta to the desperate situation of so many other war-torn parts of West Africa.

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