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Government Efforts to Resolve the Warri Crisis of 1997 – 2004

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Government Efforts to Resolve the Warri Crisis of 1997 – 2004

Henchard B. Erezene

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I. Introduction

The ethnic conflicts between the Ijo and the Itsekiri in the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta region of Nigeria blew open in March/April 1997, and continued till 2004. Apart from the destruction of lives, property and businesses, these conflicts also created security problems in the Niger Delta, which adversely affected the crude oil based economy of the country, as the activities of oil companies operating in the area were frequently disrupted.

The violent conflicts between the two groups became a source of concern to all well-meaning Nigerians, including people in government. As a result, both the Delta State and Federal Governments made concerted efforts to end the conflicts. This article is a critical examination of these efforts.

Efforts by the Military Administrations of Colonel John David Dungs and Navy Captain Walter Feghabo in Delta State

Delta State was created out of the defunct Bendel State on 27 August, 1991.The state initially consisted of twelve local government areas, namely, Aniocha, Bomadi, Burutu, Ethiope, Ika, Isoko, Ndokwa, Okpe, Oshimili, Sapele, Ughelli and Warri. The number of local government areas increased to nineteen with the nation-wide creation of additional local government areas on 27 September, 1991. The nineteen local government areas then were Aniocha North, Aniocha South, Bomadi, Burutu, Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Ika North – East, Ika South, Isoko North, Isoko South, Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, Okpe, Oshimili, Sapele, Ughelli North, Ughelli South, Warri North and Warri South. The state is, at present, made up of twenty-five local government areas, namely, Aniocha North, Aniocha South, Bomadi, Burutu, Ethiope East, Ethiope West, Ika North-East, Ika South, Isoko North, Isoko South, Ndokwa East, Ndokwa West, Okpe, Oshimili North, Oshimili South, Patani, Sapele, Udu, Ughelli North, Ughelli South, Ukwuani, Uvwie, Warri North, Warri South and Warri South – West.

The state which was created by the Federal Military Government of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, had Group Captain Luke Chijuba Ochulor, an Air Force Officer, as its Military Governor. He was succeeded by Chief Felix Ovuodoroyelbru, who won the December 1991 gubernatorial election son the platform of the Social Democratic Party, SDP, as the first civilian Executive Governor of the state on 2 January, 1992. With the return of the country to military rule in November 1993, Colonel Bassey Asuquo was appointed the new Military Administrator of the state. He handed over to Group Captain Ibrahim Kefas, another Air Force Officer, on26 September, 1994.

Group Captain Ibrahim Kefas governed Delta State for about two years and handed over to Colonel John David Dungs on 15 August, 1996. It was during the military administrator ship of Colonel J.D. Dungs (August 1996 —August 1998) that the conflicts between the Ijo and the Itsekirierupted.

Colonel J.D. Dungs worked very hard to manage the crisis between the two groups and was, indeed, commended for his efforts by the Military High Command in Abuja (The Pointer, 9/10/97). The first thing he focused his attention on was to ensure that the crisis did not escalate. To this end, he had constant dialogue, separately and jointly, with the elders and leaders of thought of the Ijo and the Itsekiri. The Military Administrator also tried his best to alleviate the sufferings of persons who were displaced from their homes during the crisis by providing relief materials. He soon realised from his discussions with the elders and leaders of thought of the two groups, however, that any attempt to resolve the crisis without getting to the root of the problem would only be a waste of time and resources. He, therefore, set up a high powered Judicial Commission of Inquiry, composed of renowned serving judges from other states of the federation headed by Justice AlhassanIdoko. Justice Idoko hailed from Kogi State but was at the time of his appointment as Chairman of the Commission, the Chief Justice of

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Benue State (Concerned Delta Citizens, 1997). The second member (Commissioner), Hon. Justice Abubakar Wada, hailed from Kano and was at the time of his appointment as a member of the Commission, a High Court Judge there. The third member, Alhaji Hassan Gimba, was a legal practitioner in his home state, Niger (Concerned Delta Citizens, 1997).

The Federal Military Government gave legal backing to the Commission by issuing Decree No.14 of 1997, and it started sitting on 2 June, 1997. Not long after the Commission started sitting, however, the Itsekiri accused it of "prejudice and bias" towards them and pulled out (Mabiaku, Jemide and Ayomike, 2003). They sought legal redress and accused the Military Administrator himself of taking sides with the Ijo against them. But the Commission continued to work and submitted its report in 1998.

Among other things, the Justice Idoko Commission of Inquiry recommended the creation of separate local government areas for the three ethnic groups in the Warri area-the Ijo, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo. But because of the Itsekiri protests, the Delta State Government could not issue a *white paper* on the report of the Commission. This was the situation of things when Colonel J.D. Dungs handed over the administration of the state to Navy Captain Walter Feghabo in August 1998.

Navy Captain Walter Feghabo did not do much. Being an Ijo, though of Nembe extraction from the Eastern Niger Delta, he was very cautious in his actions and pronouncements concerning the crisis. This situation could be easily understood by any careful and impartial observer or stakeholder. His predecessor in office, Colonel J.D. Dungs, from far away Plateau State in the Middle Belt, had been accused by the Itsekiri of taking sides with the Ijo. He (Feghabo) did not want to be caught in this web of Itsekiri criticisms. He, therefore, played safe by just making reports to Abuja, visiting devastated places with relief materials, and holding meetings with the elders and leaders of thought of the two groups; admonishing them to keep the peace until he handed over to Chief James Onanefelborion29May, 1999 (Erezene, 2008).

Efforts by the Civilian Government of Chief James Onanefelbori in Delta State

Chief James Onanefelbori, an Urhobo from Oghara, headquarters of the present Ethiope West Local Government Area in the Delta Central Senatorial District, became the second civilian Executive Governor of Delta State on 29 May, 1999. Chief Ibori had promised during his electioneering campaigns that he would bring the Ijo — Itsekiri crisis to an end, if he was elected governor. True to his promise, Chief Ibori tackled the problem immediately he was sworn in as governor. He consulted widely and held several meetings with the elders and leaders of thought of both groups. He also sought the co-operation of members of the Delta State House of Assembly as well as the Federal Government. Chief Ibori's efforts paid off, and in just a few months after his inauguration as governor, the headquarters of Warri South-West Local Government Area (whose relocation from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben was the immediate cause of the conflicts) was returned from Ogidigben to Ogbe-Ijoh.

The above development brought some peace to the area. It, however, did not go down well with the Itsekiri. The Ijo, though happy that the headquarters of the local government area had been returned to Ogbe-Ijoh, discovered another problem – the "lopsided" delineation of electoral wards in favour of the Itsekiri. This issue generated another round of crisis between the two groups (Erezene, 2011). Unfortunately, ChiefIbori was unable to solve this problem until he left office on 29 May, 2007.

That Ibori could not resolve this problem before leaving office has beenat tributed to selfish economic and political undertones in some quarters (Erezene, 2008, 2011).For instance, in its exclusive edition of 10 November, 2003, the Insider Weekly Magazine exposed the alleged financial gains Chief Ibori derived from the continued fighting between the Ijo and the Itsekiri in Warri. In a sort of abstract to the main story, the magazine lamented:

> The once lively Oil City of Warri, Delta State, has become notorious for its unending wars. And the violence is spreading like cancer. But while the city bleeds, the Chief Security Officer of the State, Governor James Ibori, and the Commanders of the numerous security agencies and task forces in the area are making a fortune, milking the state to its marrows through security votes.

The magazine went on to reveal that since the resurgence of hostilities in Warri towards the close of 2002 (early 2003), as a result of attempts by the Delta State Independent Electoral Commission (DSIEC) to create new electoral wards in the Warri Local Governments, the State Governor, Chief James Onanefelbori, had collected N750 million monthly from the state's treasury to manage the crisis. From this amount, the magazine alleged, he disbursed N200 million to the then Commander of the military outfit deployed to the area to keep the peace by the Federal Government (Operation Restore Hope), Brigadier-General Elias Zamani. Zamani in turn released less than ₦5 million to his soldiers for their upkeep and pocketed the balance with other top members of the outfit. The ordinary soldiers and their colleagues in the Police Mobile Force who were short-changed in the distribution of the windfall, helped themselves by mounting numerous checkpoints from where they extorted money from motorists and other innocent citizens. For these

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soldiers, it was at least better than staying idle in the barracks or facing fire in the Bakassi Peninsula, where Nigeria had boundary problems with Cameroon, or being in Liberia or some other crises-torn West African countries as part of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group, ECOMOG.

The magazine further alleged that the sums of money Governor JamesIbori collected under the guise of maintaining security were not static, but increased as the hostilities intensified. It reported that in just one swoop, one night, the Governor and his cousin, the then Secretary to the State Government (SSG), Dr. Emmanuel EwetanOduaghan, collected ₦3 million in two cheques of ₦1.5 million each from the state's coffers under the "omnibus heading of Warri crisis."

The above situation of things would have continued, from all indications, but for the Federal Government's declaration of emergency rule in Plateau State on18 May, 2004, following the ethno-religious conflicts in Yelwa-Shandam Local Government Area of the state (Erezene, 2008, 2011). Before that incident, the Delta State Governor, Chief James Onanefelbori seemed unwilling to take firm actions concerning the Warri crisis. His usual reply to suggestions that he was slow in dealing with the situation was:

> We are in a democratic regime, where everything will sort out itself systematically. People should remember that we are not under a military regime where things are done by military fiat (Vanguard, 21/8/03:1).

But barely three months after the proclamation of emergency rule in Plateau State by the Federal Government, Governor James Ibori presented his famous "The Road Map to Peace" to the Delta State House of Assembly, seeking the creation of Community Development Committees across the three Warri Local Government Areas. This bill was quickly passed and signed into law as the Development Administration Committee Law 2004 on 7 March, 2005, creating a total of twelve Community Development Committees. These developments clearly indicate that Chief Ibori could have done better than what he did about the Warri crisis before leaving office in May 2007.

II. Efforts by the Federal Government of Nigeria

General SaniAbacha was the Military Head of State of Nigeria when the disagreements between the Ijo and Itsekiri became violent in March/April 1997. His government did not waste time in tackling the problem. Its first reaction was to send in the police. When the conventional police could not contain the situation, the specially trained anti-riot police unit, the Mobile Police Force, was mobilised to Warri. When these specially trained policemen too could not cope, military personnel were deployed (Imobighe, 2002). Finally, a Joint Military Task Force code-named Operation Restore Hope was permanently stationed in the area. This military outfit was established in 2003 during the first term in office of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo who took over from General Abdulsalami Abubakar on 29 May, 1999 as civilian president. The scope of responsibility of this military outfit was later expanded to cover all the trouble spots of the entire Niger Delta region.

Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, one would say, tried his best to help the Delta State Government to resolve the crisis. Apart from establishing the Joint Military Task Force, he held series of meetings with the Ijo, Itsekiri and other stakeholders in the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta. His government also set up a Presidential Committee headed by retired Lieutenant-General The ophilusDanjuma in 2003 to "investigate the remote and immediate causes of the crisis and recommend ways and means of restoring peace in the war torn zone." Unfortunately, the report of this committee has not been made public uptil now.

III. Evaluation of the Efforts

There is no doubt that all the governments (military and civilian) that ruled between March/April 1997 and July 2004 in Delta State and at the Federal level, did their utmost to resolve the crisis between the Ijo and the Itsekiri. Their efforts could not, however, completely reconcile the two groups until 2004. This was because the fundamental desires and demands of the people were not met. The Ijo who felt that they were being oppressed by the Itsekiri had persistently requested government to create a separate local government area for them. It needs to be pointed out, that all commissions of inquiry set up by the Delta State Government to find lasting solutions to the ethnic conflicts in Warri; the Justice Philip Nnaemeka — Agu Judicial Commission of Inquiry of 1993 (before the crisis), and the Justice AlhassanIdoko Judicial Commission of Inquiry of 1998 (during the crisis), had always recommended the creation of separate local government areas for the three contending ethnic groups — the Ijo, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo. But the Itsekiri had insisted that the Ijo cannot get a separate local government area out of Warri and its environs which they call their "home land" (Ayomike, 1990).

In addition to the frustrations of not being able to get a separate local government area, the Ijo were also aggrieved that in the local government areas they shared with the Itsekiri, they (Itsekiri) had more electoral wards than themselves. The implication of this situation is that the Ijo cannot produce the Chairman of Local Government except by consensus arrangement. This could ordinarily have been a relatively simple problem to solve, since government itself had declared that the

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Itsekiri were a minority group in the local government areas they shared with the Ijo (Delta State Government, 2004). All that needed to have been done was for the Delta State Independent Electoral Commission (DSIEC) to reverse the in balance or work out an arrangement that would have put the two groups at par. In fact, DSIEC attempted to solve the problem but its proposals could not see the light of day because of Itsekiri protests.

As the conflicts between the two groups intensified and the fear of emergency rule loomed in the air, the Delta State Government was compelled to do something as already stated. It divided the area covered by the three Warri Local Government Areas, namely, Warri North, Warri South, and Warri South-West, into a total of twelve Community Development Committees in 2004. These are: Egbema with headquarters at Opuama; Toru-Ebe with headquarters at Ogboinbiri; Koko/Abigborodo with headquarters at Abigborodo; Benin River Itsekiri with headquarters at Ogheye; Ode-Itsekiri with headquarters at Ode-Itsekiri; Okere with headquarters at Ugbuwangue; Okere-Urhobo with headquarters at Oto-Orere; Agbarha with headquarters at Otovwodo-Agbarha Gbaramatu with headquarters at Oporoza ;Ogbe-Ijoh/Isaba/Diebiri with headquarters at Isaba; Ogidigben/Ugborodo with headquarters at Ogidigben; and Orere with headquarters at Deghele.

But even in the creation of these Community Development Committees, it can be easily observed that the Itsekiri were clearly favoured. The Itsekiri had six of the Committees, namely, Koko/Abigborodo with headquarters at Abigborodo; Benin River Itsekiri with headquarters at Ogheye; Ode-Itsekiri with headquarters at Ode-Itsekiri; Okere with headquarters at Ugbuwangue; Ogidigben/Ugborodo with headquarters at Ogidigben; and Orere with headquarters at Deghele. The Ijo hadfour – Egbema with headquarters at Opuama; Toru-Ebe with headquarters at Ogboinbiri; Gbaramatu with headquarters at Oporoza; and Ogbe-Ijoh/Isaba/Diebiri with headquarters at Isaba, while the Urhobo had, just two, namely, Okere-Urhobo with headquarters at Oto-Orere, and Agbarha with headquarters at Otovwodo-Agbarha. This lopsided distribution of the Development Committees in favour of the minority Itsekiri did not escape the notice of the Ijo and Urhobo.

A part from the lopsided distribution of the Community Development Committees in favour of the Itsekiri, the Ijo were aggrieved that their presence in Warri Urban had been undermined. While the Urhobo were given Agbarha and Okere — Urhobo Development Committees, and the Itsekiri, Okere (or Okere — Itsekiri); all in Warri South Local Government Area, the Ijo had been totally left out. The political implication of this development is that the Ijo have been denied their indigene status in Warri and Warri South Local Government Area (Erezene, 2008).

The annoyance of the Ijo in this matter is quite understandable. In 1955 when the Warri Urban District Council was created by the Action Group-led Government of the Western Region, it consisted of twenty-one wards: Alders Town I, Alders Town 2, Alders Town 3, Alders Town 4, Alders Town 5, Alders Town 6, Ogbe-Ijoh 1, Ogbe-Ijoh 2, Agbassa 1, Agbassa 2, Agbassa 3, Agbassa 4, Okere-Ajamimogha 1, Okere-Ajamimogha 2, Okere-Ajamimogha 3, Okere Ajamimogha 4, Okere-Ajanilmogha 5, Government Reservation Area, Odion1, Odion 2 and Odion 3. Without raising complex arguments, it can be easily observed by anyone that is familiar with Warri and its environs, that Ogbe-Ijoh I and 2 were Ijo wards. It is also known that the area covered by Alders Town 1 to 6 and the Government Reservation Area were owned by the Ijo (Olabrakompre Community, 2003). These places were all part of the lease (B5) that was made to the British in 1908 by Chief DoghoNuma. The land covered by this lease was owned by the Ogbe-Ijoh (Sagay, n.d.; Ikime, 2011). But with the new Community Development Committees created by the Ibori Administration, the Ijo have been completely eliminated from Warri Urban which mainly constitutes the present Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State. This local government is made up of twelve electoral wards: Obodo/Omadino, Ode-Itsekiri, Ogunu/Ekurede (Urhobo), Ugbuwangue/ Ekurede (Itsekiri), G.R.A., Bowen, Pessu, Okere, Igbudu, Edjeba, Okumagba I and Okumagba II (INEC, 1998). The only Ijo ward retained in the local government area is the Warri (Government) Reservation Area (GRA). It is, however, not viewed as such by the Itsekiri, who presently own almost all the property in the place. This implies that the Ijo do not have even a single ward in Warri South Local Government Area at present (Erezene, 2008).

On the other side, some of the Itsekiri and their supporters such as EvangelistMukoro had asked the Federal Government of Nigeria to make Warri a Federal Territory like Lagos of old, and Abuja. This, according to them, was to make the place an ethnic-sentiments-free zone or territory for all Nigerians to live in. But government has not responded to this suggestion either. Because of this and other unresolved issues, some people feel that the hostile relations between the Ijo and the Itsekiri are still far from being settled. The truth is that genuine reconciliation and lasting peace between the Ijo and the Itsekiri can only come from mutual understanding between the two groups. It is not something that can be decreed from Asaba or Abuja. It is interesting to note that some of the elder statesmen in the area have started to understand this situation. For example, in an open letter to Professor ItseSagay on the subject of the political control of Warri (Vanguard, 23/5/03:33), Chief J.E. Ukueku, a renowned Urhobopharmacist pleaded: “Dear Itse, let us come

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together to further a lasting settlement. It is not in Abuja. It is right here with you and me."

In a similar publication (Vanguard, 4/8/03:26), Chief E.K. Clark is said to have pleaded as follows:

> …Wemust give peace a chance. Let us have peace because a majority of the Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri, who are suffering today, do not understand why we are fighting and what we are fighting for. Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo should forget the past and meet together to find a solution to these problems without involving the government. Such a meeting will be our mini National Conference, and we must be prepared with the spirit of give and take. Enough is enough. (Ofogbor, 2004: 79)

The truth is that the two groups know everything about themselves, and can continue to live peacefully together, if they so desire. All that is needed is a little sincerity, and "the spirit of give and take" as suggested by Chief E. K. Clark.

IV. Conclusion

There is no doubt that both the Delta State and Federal Governments made spirited efforts to resolve the Warri crisis. These efforts did not quickly succeed because some of the highly placed individuals in the reconciliation process were not very sincere. For instance, as revealed by the Insider Weekly Magazine, it is possible that some officials of government initially wanted the crisis to continue for their selfish economic and political gains. But for certain developments outside the state, such as the declaration of a state of emergency in Plateau State, these officials would perhaps have continued to exploit the crisis for personal gains!

In spite of all the accusations, however, credit must still be given to whom it is due. Despite the allegations of self-enrichment against Chief James Onanefelbori, the then Governor of Delta State, by the Insider Weekly Magazine, it cannot be denied that he played the greatest role in the reconciliation process. Being a Deltan, he, no doubt, understood the complexities of the crisis more than the Military Administrators before him, and even the officials of the Federal Government of Nigeria, military and civillian. He was, therefore, able to produce a political solution to the major problem. The federal administrations, military and civilian, initiated more of military actions which could not resolve the crisis.

For lasting reconciliation and healing to take place, the people, especially the Ijo and the Itsekiri must be sincere to themselves, and embrace "the spirit of give and take" as suggested by Chief E.K. Clark. They alone know the true history and other developments about themselves, and are in a better position to tell the truth concerning themselves. It is a matter of conscience.

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