

Government Efforts to Resolve the Warri Crisis of 1997 -2004

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Abstract

Many people (including non-Nigerians) are aware that there was a serious crisis between the Ijo and Itsekiri of the Warri area of the Western Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Some of these people may also be aware that the crisis was caused mainly by the relocation of the headquarters of the then newly created Warri South (later Warri South-West) Local Government Area from Ogbe-Ijoh, an Ijo town, to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town, by the General Sani Abacha's¹ led Federal Military Government of the time. What many may not be aware of, is how the crisis was resolved. This article examines the efforts made by the Delta State and Federal Governments of Nigeria to end the crisis.

Index terms—

1 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. 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 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).

2 Efforts by the

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.

3 EFFORTS BY THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT OF CHIEF JAMES ONANEFEIBORI IN DELTA STATE

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

49 Navy Captain Walter Feghabo did not do much. Being an Ijo, though of Nembe extraction from the Eastern
50 Niger Delta, he was very cautious in his actions and pronouncements concerning the crisis. This situation could
51 be easily understood by any careful and impartial observer or stakeholder. His predecessor in office, Colonel J.D.
52 Dungs, from far away Plateau State in the Middle Belt, had been accused by the Itsekiri of taking sides with the
53 Ijo. He (Feghabo) did not want to be caught in this web of Itsekiri criticisms. He, therefore, played safe by just
54 making reports to Abuja, visiting devastated places with relief materials, and holding meetings with the elders
55 and leaders of thought of the two groups; admonishing them to keep the peace until he handed over to Chief
56 James OnanefeIborion29May, 1999 (Erezene, 2008).

57 3 Efforts by the Civilian Government of Chief James OnanefeI- 58 bori in Delta State

59 Chief James OnanefeIbori, an Urhobo from Oghara, headquarters of the present Ethiope West Local Government
60 Area in the Delta Central Senatorial District, became the second civilian Executive Governor of Delta State on
61 29 May, 1999. Chief Ibori had promised during his electioneering campaigns that he would bring the Ijo -Itsekiri
62 crisis to an end, if he was elected governor. True to his promise, Chief Ibori tackled the problem immediately he
63 was sworn in as governor. He consulted widely and held several meetings with the elders and leaders of thought
64 of both groups. He also sought the co-operation of members of the Delta State House of Assembly as well as the
65 Federal Government. Chief Ibori's efforts paid off, and in just a few months after his inauguration as governor,
66 the headquarters of Warri South-West Local Government Area (whose relocation from Ogbe-Ijoh to Ogidigben
67 was the immediate cause of the conflicts) was returned from Ogidigben to Ogbe-Ijoh.

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

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

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

82 The magazine went on to reveal that since the resurgence of hostilities in Warri towards the close of 2002
83 (early 2003), as a result of attempts by the Delta State Independent Electoral Commission (DSIEC) to create
84 new electoral wards in the Warri Local Governments, the State Governor, Chief James OnanefeIbori, had collected
85 N750 million monthly from the state's treasury to manage the crisis. From this amount, the magazine alleged,
86 he disbursed N200 million to the then Commander of the military outfit deployed to the area to keep the peace
87 by the Federal Government (Operation Restore Hope), Brigadier-General Elias Zamani. Zamani in turn released
88 less than N 5 million to his soldiers for their upkeep and pocketed Volume XVII Issue I Version I the balance with
89 other top members of the outfit. The ordinary soldiers and their colleagues in the Police Mobile Force who were
90 short-changed in the distribution of the windfall, helped themselves by mounting numerous checkpoints from
91 where they extorted money from motorists and other innocent citizens. For these soldiers, it was at least better
92 than staying idle in the barracks or facing fire in the Bakassi Peninsula, where Nigeria had boundary problems
93 with Cameroon, or being in Liberia or some other crises-torn West African countries as part of the ECOWAS
94 Monitoring Group, ECOMOG.

95 The magazine further alleged that the sums of money Governor JamesIbori collected under the guise of
96 maintaining security were not static, but increased as the hostilities intensified. It reported that in just one
97 swoop, one night, the Governor and his cousin, the then Secretary to the State Government (SSG), Dr. Emmanuel
98 EwetanOduaghan, collected N3 million in two cheques of N1.5 million each from the state's coffers under the
99 "omnibus heading of Warri crisis."

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

105 We are in a democratic regime, where everything will sort out itself systematically. People should remember
106 that we are not under a military regime where things are done by military fiat ??

107 4 II. Efforts by he Federal Government of Nigeria

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

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

123 5 III. Evaluation of the Efforts

124 There is no doubt that all the governments (military and civilian) that ruled between March/April 1997 and
125 July 2004 in Delta State and at the Federal level, did their utmost to resolve the crisis between the Ijo and the
126 Itsekiri. Their efforts could not, however, completely reconcile the two groups until 2004. This was because the
127 fundamental desires and demands of the people were not met. The Ijo who felt that they were being oppressed
128 by the Itsekiri had persistently requested government to create a separate local government area for them. It
129 needs to be pointed out, that all commissions of inquiry set up by the Delta State Government to find lasting
130 solutions to the ethnic conflicts in Warri; the Justice Philip Nnaemeka -Agu Judicial Commission of Inquiry
131 of 1993 (before the crisis), and the Justice Alhassan Idoko Judicial Commission of Inquiry of 1998 (during the
132 crisis), had always recommended the creation of separate local government areas for the three contending ethnic
133 groups -the Ijo, the Itsekiri and the Urhobo. But the Itsekiri had insisted that the Ijo cannot get a separate local
134 government area out of Warri and its environs which they call their "home land" (Ayomike, 1990). In addition to
135 the frustrations of not being able to get a separate local government area, the Ijo were also aggrieved that in the
136 local government areas they shared with the Itsekiri, they (Itsekiri) had more electoral wards than themselves.
137 The implication of this situation is that the Ijo cannot produce the Chairman of Local Government except by
138 consensus arrangement. This could ordinarily have been a relatively simple problem to solve, since government
139 itself had declared that the Itsekiri were a minority group in the local government areas they shared with the
140 Ijo (Delta State Government, 2004). All that needed to have been done was for the Delta State Independent
141 Electoral Commission (DSIEC) to reverse the in balance or work out an arrangement that would have put the
142 two groups at par. In fact, DSIEC attempted to solve the problem but its proposals could not see the light of
143 day because of Itsekiri protests.

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

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

163 A part from the lopsided distribution of the Community Development Committees in favour of the Itsekiri,
164 the Ijo were aggrieved that their presence in Warri Urban had been undermined. While the Urhobo were given
165 Agbarha and Okere -Urhobo Development Committees, and the Itsekiri, Okere (or Okere -Itsekiri); all in Warri
166 South Local Government Area, the Ijo had been totally left out. The political implication of this development is
167 that the Ijo have been denied their indigene status in Warri and Warri South Local Government Area (Erezeze,
168 2008).

169 On the other side, some of the Itsekiri and their supporters such as EvangelistMukoro had asked the Federal
170 Government of Nigeria to make Warri a Federal Territory like Lagos of old, and Abuja. This, according to them,
171 was to make the place an ethnic-sentiments-free zone or territory for all Nigerians to live in. But government has
172 not responded to this suggestion either. Because of this and other unresolved issues, Volume XVII Issue I Version
173 I some people feel that the hostile relations between the Ijo and the Itsekiri are still far from being settled. The
174 truth is that genuine reconciliation and lasting peace between the Ijo and the Itsekiri can only come from mutual
175 understanding between the two groups. It is not something that can be decreed from Asaba or Abuja. It is
176 interesting to note that some of the elder statesmen in the area have started to understand this situation. For
177 example, in an open letter to Professor ItseSagay on the subject of the political control of Warri ??Vanguard,
178 ??3 together to find a solution to these problems without involving the government. Such a meeting will be
179 our mini National Conference, and we must be prepared with the spirit of give and take. Enough is enough.
180 ??Ofogbor, 2004: 79) The truth is that the two groups know everything about themselves, and can continue to
181 live peacefully together, if they so desire. All that is needed is a little sincerity, and "the spirit of give and take"
182 as suggested by Chief E. K. Clark.

183 7 IV.

184 8 Conclusion

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

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

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

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Figure 1:

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 "

Figure 2:

Agbassa 3, Agbassa 4, Okere-Ajamimogha 1, Okere-Ajamimogha

Ajamimogha 4, Okere-Ajanilmogha 5, Government Reservation Area, Odion1,

2, Okere- 3, Okere Ajamimogha

Figure 3:

203

1 2

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