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Car Bombing “With Due Respect”: The Niger Delta Insurgency and the *Idea* Called MEND

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ABSTRACT. This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of the insurgency in the oil-rich Delta region of Nigeria. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a loose coalition of insurgent groups responsible for many spectacular cases of kidnapping and bombing, is interrogated within the new wars theoretical prism. The article draws on interview and focus group data garnered from six categories of actors, including forty-two ex-insurgents engaged in kidnapping, pipeline vandalism, inter alia, and official e-mails from MEND’s spokesperson, “Jomo Gbomo.” MEND’s loose structure, fluid membership, public sympathy, the Delta creeks and vast resources, the article argues, have combined to produce an unprecedented insurgency in Nigeria. The analysis demonstrates fundamental ways in which the MEND-led oil insurgency aligns with tenets of the new war thesis. The article also provides important caveats to using this approach in the Niger Delta case study.

KEYWORDS. Niger Delta, oil insurgency, MEND, new wars

INTRODUCTION

With due respect to all invited guests, dignitaries and attendees of the 50th independence anniversary of Nigeria being held today, Friday, October 1, 2010 at

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the Eagle Square Abuja, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is asking everyone to begin immediate evacuation of the entire area within the next 30 minutes. . . . Several explosive devices have been successfully planted in and around the venue by our operatives working inside the government security services. . . . There is nothing worth celebrating after 50 years of failure.

—Jomo Gbomo, MEND's spokesperson, October 1, 2010.¹

Asymmetric warfare pervades the new world order. Transnational non-state, parastate, private, militia groups, rebels, or extra-legal actors existing in the interstices of nation-states have rendered old paradigms of war nearly obsolete. This new war has no definite battlegrounds² and is marked by three fundamental characteristics. It is destatized³ in contradistinction to old wars that were fought between nation-states. The new wars often involve private military forces and also tend to be characterized by an asymmetry of military capacity.⁴ In addition, while old wars had definite military systems with rules of engagement, the new wars have little or none.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has been waging an evanescent insurgent campaign against the Nigerian state that broadly fits the new war model. MEND operatives are typically anonymous, unconfined to any particular space, adept at using civilians as human shields, have kidnapped oil workers and community members for protection and money, and are not bound by conventional rules of engagement. The MEND project is also invigorated by an accident of geography—the difficult terrain of the Niger Delta region. Such inaccessible areas, which in other contexts also include mountains and trackless plains, generally invite rebellion.⁵ The riverine Delta region guarantees that MEND insurgents remain unperturbed by agents of the Joint Task Force (JTF), which is the Nigerian government's military unit responsible for securing the Delta's oil operations and infrastructure. It takes years of having fished or traveled in the rivers and expansive tributaries and having farmed in the marshy mangrove lands to know the area. The difficulty the JTF has in navigating the harsh terrain is exacerbated by years of state neglect that ensures that physical infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, which could have made their mission less cumbersome, are absent.

The JTF authorities confirm that for them such warfare is “something new” and an “emerging concept.”⁶ Nigerian military officials see similarities in this regard between the battle in the Delta with the U.S. experience in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.⁷ Therefore, the JTF confronts a bidimensional phenomenon that even the best armies in the world find difficult to curtail: *riverine asymmetrical warfare*.

This article is concerned with understanding the emergence of the meta-phenomenon called MEND through the theoretical prism of the *new war* thesis. We do not attempt to test the new war thesis but use it to engender a greater understanding of the Delta insurgency. We find considerable merit in the new

war thesis despite its obvious limitations.⁸ Drawing on the likes of Kaldor and Münkler, this article answers questions such as what factors have contributed to MEND's ascendance in an environment already saturated with oil-related violence and why does MEND pose such a significant level of threat, one unmatched by any preceding it. As such we contribute to a small but growing literature on MEND.⁹

Many insightful and enlightening theoretical approaches have been used to explain the rise of MEND and the Niger Delta crisis in general. These include the notion of "the oil complex,"¹⁰ the "economics of war thesis,"¹¹ and the "resource curse thesis,"¹² among others. These analyses fundamentally enrich a literature that remains overwhelmingly descriptive. Producing greater theoretical and empirical insights into the operational micro-mechanics of MEND is particularly important given the geopolitical significance of the oil-rich Niger Delta and the speed with which developments are unfolding in that region.

This article is divided into five parts. First, we provide a brief (and necessarily incomplete) overview of the Delta region. Second, the sources of data and methods are presented, and, third, we provide a systematic evaluation of MEND. This includes an analysis of the rise of MEND, its mode of operation, the level of public sympathy it enjoys, funding, sources for weapons, and media relations. The fourth section examines the relevance of the new war thesis in analyzing the MEND insurgency, while the concluding section tentatively explicates the multifaceted consequences of instability in the Niger Delta.

THE NIGER DELTA REGION

Crude oil extraction in the Niger Delta region generates 96 percent of all Nigeria's foreign earnings and 85 percent of state revenues. Between 1999 and 2009, Nigeria earned an estimated \$200 billion from oil.¹³ The Delta region is thus crucial to the corporate survival of the Nigerian state.¹⁴ However, several generations of state neglect, corruption, and mismanagement have ensured that the Delta region is one of the most socioeconomically and politically deprived in Nigeria.

The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his lieutenants in the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) on November 10, 1995, signaled the Nigerian state's low tolerance for peaceful protest and remains a watershed in the struggle over resource control in Nigeria.¹⁵ By the late 1990s, there was a transition from nonviolence to violence, in the post-Ken Sara Wiwa era, which saw a disquieting proliferation of armed gangs and insurgent groups across the Delta.¹⁶ Several sociopolitical and economic factors facilitated the turn to violent forms of protest. For instance, corrupt political elites provided arms and ammunition to many Delta youth prior to the

1999 elections. These caches of arms would become readily available when political godfathers promptly abandoned their mercenaries after winning elections, particularly in 1999.¹⁷ The internecine Warri crisis (elucidated in this article) and the preference of the Nigerian state for heavy handed responses and outright militarization of the Delta region are also contributing factors. The emergence of miscellaneous oil infrastructure protection rackets and other criminal syndicates silhouette the Delta crisis and have served to dwarf the legitimate grievances in the region.

The Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Asari Dokubo, in particular, called for violent acts as a form of protest and vehicle for communicating with the Nigerian state.¹⁸ Rebellious and quasicriminal activities like illegal oil bunkering, pipeline vandalism, disruption of oil production activities, flow station shut downs, riots, and demonstrations intensified. By 2003, insurgents began kidnapping oil workers at a frenetic pace,¹⁹ purportedly in protest to the marginalization of the oil producing communities of the Delta by the state and transnational oil corporations, exacerbating the level of violence in what was already proving to be an ungovernable space.²⁰ The almost seamless comingling of legitimate protest and sheer criminality has led to questions about whether groups such as NDPVF are "liberation movements or criminal syndicates."²¹

In late 2005, an uber-insurgent movement organization was formed in the Niger Delta. Christened the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), it operates as an amorphous, multifaceted amalgam of insurgent groups and displays an unprecedented precision in executing its intentions. MEND's major ambition is to cripple the capacity of the Nigerian rentier petro-state to produce crude oil. It has engaged in many different actions.²² In December 2005 it bombed two Shell Petroleum Development Corporation pipelines in the Okirika and Andoni areas of Rivers State.²³ On January 11, 2006, MEND kidnapped four foreign oil workers and fought a gun battle with Nigerian military personnel.²⁴ On January 15, 2006, MEND combatants destroyed two military boathouses and a flow station in Bayelsa state. By May 2009, the Nigerian state had dedicated two warships, fourteen gunboats, and seven thousand troops to its fight against MEND.²⁵ This provided a feedback loop, as the troops further escalated the crisis.

Perhaps MEND's most high-profile actions to date occurred in 2010. The first was on March 15, 2010, when MEND's spokesperson Jomo Gbomo announced via e-mail that MEND had compromised the security at the Delta state government house annex in Warri, which was the venue for a postamnesty dialogue organized by the *Vanguard* newspaper. MEND advised the public to avoid this location and its environs. Warning that the "deceit of endless dialogue and conferences will no longer be tolerated,"²⁶ MEND detonated a car bomb at exactly 11:30 a.m., as they had warned. A second car bomb then exploded. Tragically, six people were injured and eight others died in the

incident. MEND claimed that they chose not to detonate their third and “most powerful” bomb for humanitarian reasons.²⁷ Seven months later, on October 1, MEND struck again in Abuja on the occasion of Nigeria’s fiftieth anniversary of independence celebration. MEND released a statement asserting that there was “nothing worth celebrating after 50 years of failure” while the injustices suffered by the Niger Delta people remained unaddressed.²⁸ When the dust settled, at least sixteen people had died and sixty-seven were injured in the bomb attacks.

These attacks were not only high profile but also marked a fundamental shift in tactics, impact, and targets between 2005 and 2010. The attacks also demonstrated the intensification of the crisis and focus on public spaces rather than exclusively on oil production sites and infrastructure. These acts were performatively used to communicate the goals of MEND and provoke fear in both the Nigerian state and the masses. The next section deals with the sources and methods of data collection.

DATA AND METHODS

This article draws from a larger study on the politics of kidnapping of oil workers in Nigeria in five of the nine Niger Delta states. The fieldwork was conducted in 2009 and 2010 in Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, and Cross River states. The study focuses on community members (men and women over 18 years), political and environmental justice activists, and representatives of concerned NGOs. Insurgents at the Obubra Orientation Camp, Cross River state, who are being rehabilitated under the amnesty program offered by the Nigerian federal government were also interviewed.²⁹ This program was established to provide state pardon for insurgents who laid down their arms as per a 2009 amnesty arrangement. Others include journalists and military authorities at the JTF offices in Delta and Bayelsa states. In total, 114 participants were involved in the study. Forty-two interviews and 13 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Nineteen of the interviewees and 23 FGD participants were former insurgents. The focus groups varied in size from a minimum of 2 participants to a maximum of 9. Seventy-two people participated in 13 focus group discussions. These include 7 editorial board members of a major Nigerian newspaper and over 50 community members drawn from two communities in the Delta region, Agge in Bayelsa and Okerenkoko in Delta state.

This study also benefits from a privileged dataset: the official e-mails from Jomo Gbomo, MEND’s spokesperson. These messages set out MEND’s intended actions, justifications, and criticism of the Nigerian government. One of the co-authors (Temitope Oriola) is one of only fifty people or organizations in the world to whom these e-mails are personally addressed. It also draws on a research trip to one of the creeks used by insurgents, specifically

a visit to the camp of the Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF), an affiliate of MEND. In August 2010 Oriola visited the NDFF or “Egbema 1” camp in Edo state as a guest of Henry Bindodogha, the founder of the NDFF. The NDFF became famous in 2007 when its operatives kidnapped four Americans working for Global Services, an oil-servicing firm contracted to Chevron Nigeria Limited.³⁰ Bindodogha accepted the government’s amnesty offer in 2009 and was appointed senior special assistant to the Edo state governor on surveillance and waterways security.³¹

The rich qualitative data gathered allow us to address the objectives of this article. The following section deals with the factors precipitating the emergence of MEND.

THE RISE OF MEND

Despite its comparatively recent emergence, MEND has quickly become the symbol of the insurgency of young people in the Niger Delta region against the Nigerian state and transnational oil corporations. MEND’s rise is a culmination of several historical facts and loosely connected contemporary events. At the broadest level, various factors provided political opportunities for MEND’s emergence, most notably a general public backlash against state repression, widespread corruption, and intra-elite squabbling.³²

As every standard analysis of the Delta crises recognizes, the squalor of the Delta region has also played a huge role in the emergence of insurgent groups.³³ This is further compounded by the pervasive environmental degradation brought by the oil production activities and concomitant destruction of the local people’s sources of livelihood.³⁴ In this article we divide the origins of MEND into two timelines for clarity.

Historical Considerations

The historical antecedents of the Ijaw-speaking peoples, from whom MEND draws most of its membership, also offer clear indications for the emergence of MEND.³⁵ The Ijaws have always been a minority among minorities. In colonial times, the Ijaws were politically and economically dominated by their neighbors the Itshekiri and Urhobo, groups that were also marginalized within the Western region dominated by the Yorubas.³⁶ However, as Nigeria approached political independence from Britain the Ijaw people feared that they would be further marginalized. In September 1957, Alan Lennox-Boyd, the British Secretary of State for the colonies, appointed a four-member panel chaired by Henry Willink to “ascertain the facts about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears.”³⁷ The commission warned that the oil-rich minority region “should not be neglected or so badly treated or oppressed to rebel so that no troops will be needed to quell such

rebellion.”³⁸ The committee failed to recommend creating the type of separate political structures for which the minorities advocated.³⁹

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria became a sovereign state, and the fears of the Delta minorities that they would be marginalized in terms of such things as resource allocation, employment, and scholarships were quickly realized.⁴⁰ In 1966, Isaac Adaka Boro led the Niger Delta Volunteer Force in a secessionist war against the Nigerian state.⁴¹ This event continues to have a monumental impact on present-day insurgents. For instance, Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force who called for violent action against the Nigerian state in the aftermath of the 1995 execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, states that the “person we draw our inspiration from today is Isaac Adaka Boro and to us, he is the hero of the struggle.”⁴² Other actors who favor nonviolent repertoires and those who use violent tactics alike have not hidden their admiration for, and intellectual debt to, Adaka Boro.⁴³

The Warri crisis of March 1997 also contributed significantly to the emergence of insurgent groups, including MEND. This crisis revolved around the ownership and control of the petro-city of Warri. After having created the Warri Southwest local government with headquarters in Ogbeh-Ijaw, in the Ijaw-dominated area of Warri, the administration of General Sani Abacha then relocated the headquarters to the Itsekiri area under suspicious circumstances. This prompted a violent struggle among the Ijaws, Itsekiris, and Urhobos over who owned Warri and thus should enjoy the accruing political patronage.⁴⁴

This crisis shaped the Ijaw-led insurgency in at least three crucial ways. First, some Ijaw-speaking youths in Bayelsa, Edo, Lagos, and other states around the country either volunteered or were recruited to support Ijaws in the armed struggle against the Itsekiris in Warri. Several unemployed young people from Lagos, in particular, felt obliged to fight for their people.⁴⁵ This influx of Ijaw volunteers turned the city into a battleground where hundreds of people died. It also served as an inadvertent recruitment drive and rehearsal for the violence to come.

Second, this conflict caused a major arms proliferation in Warri. Arsenals were stored in schools and churches to avoid being detected by the authorities, and these arms ultimately became available to insurgents.⁴⁶ Several ex-insurgents including the founder of the NDFF, Bindodogha, point to the Warri crisis as an avenue for garnering the first major consignment of arms for the insurgency.⁴⁷

Third, the ultimate reversal of the decision to relocate the headquarters of the Warri South local government confirmed what many already believed: that the Nigerian state only understood violence. Ijaw combatants in the Warri crisis believe that if they had not resorted to violence the local government headquarters and accompanying perks such as political appointments, civil service jobs, and contracts would have been lost. While the impact of this “cognitive liberation”⁴⁸ is hard to measure, many nonviolent activists and

insurgents agree that the Warri crisis was a landmark event in the Niger Delta insurgency.⁴⁹

Immediate Causes of MEND's Birth

Three key arrests of political figures from the Niger Delta also played a vital role in the emergence of MEND. The first was the arrest of Asari Dokubo, the NDPVF leader, on charges of treason on September 21, 2005.⁵⁰ Dokubo was arrested partly because he was the first prominent figure to call explicitly for violence against the Nigerian state.⁵¹ As one political activist argued, the older generations had failed, so Dokubo became the voice of the people and the government thought he was a threat. The moment Asari Dokubo was arrested a second time after temporarily gaining his freedom as per an agreement with the federal government, some people in the Niger Delta lost confidence in the state. They felt that the state had “kidnapped our person. So, the boys started kidnapping.”⁵² Several activists and insurgents corroborate this assertion.⁵³ MEND was unequivocal in its public demand for the release of Dokubo. As Asari Dokubo confirmed in an interview, “MEND was used to bring me out of the prison.”

The second was the arrest by British authorities on September 15, 2005, of Diepreye Alamiyeseigha (popularly known as Alams), governor of Bayelsa state, for alleged money laundering. Like Dokubo's arrest, this was perceived as a witch hunt of a political personality from the Delta. By October of the same year, the All States Trust Bank owned by Chief Ebitimi Banigo became the subject of an investigation by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC). The EFCC was an ascendant organization at the time but one that also earned a reputation for being used to persecute opponents of President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration. When the panic created by the EFCC's move against All States Trust Bank eventually led to the liquidation of the bank, many Niger Deltans were convinced that the federal government wanted to completely muzzle their business and political strength. The crisis was further complicated by the arrest of the leader of the Klansmen Konfraternity (KK), Olo, in November 2005, which led to a rapprochement among multi-farious insurgent leaders.⁵⁴ Having considered the historical and immediate factors that led to the rise of MEND, the article next explains MEND's mode of operation. In particular, we analyze the problematic of treating MEND as an *organization*—the public support it enjoys, sources of funding, and the significance of the Delta creeks, among others.

MEND'S MODE OF OPERATION

MEND's devastating efficacy has generated considerable speculation about how it operates. We offer insights into the success of MEND's operations

based on interviews and FGDs with several actors, particularly forty-two ex-insurgents. These include Asari Dokubo, who founded the NDPVF, and Henry Bindodogha, the leader of the NDFF. All of the ex-insurgents interviewed for this project, except Asari Dokubo, acknowledged being members of MEND. We accentuate how several factors have contributed to the comparative success of MEND's operations, in particular its loose structure and secrecy, fluid membership, level of public sympathy, considerable resources, media relations, and the social space represented by the creeks. These factors are highlighted primarily to demonstrate what makes MEND the clearinghouse of the Delta insurgency. The selection of these factors is far from random: they are consistent with the new war thesis. The JTF confirms engaging the bidimensional phenomenon of riverine asymmetrical warfare as stated earlier. In addition, the salience of these factors—flexible tactics, cultivating a protective belt of sympathizers, mastering the arts of simulation and dissimulation or fabricating pretences, and using remote locations as operational bases is widely recognized in such warfare.⁵⁵

Loose Structure

Insurgent groups engaged in asymmetrical warfare seem to thrive on loose structures. For instance, in analyzing the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF), Abdullah and Muana⁵⁶ argue that “it could hardly be said that there was an organisation” among the disparate alienated youths who formed the RUF. Conversely, partly due to its origins,⁵⁷ MEND conscientiously adopts a loose structure, aiding its insurgency, as evident in two major ways. First, while top militant leaders such as Tom Polo, “Africa,” Asari Dokubo, “Egbema 1,” Boyloff, etc., have at one time or another been linked with MEND; as Okonta notes, “MEND is not an ‘organisation’ in the formal sense of the word. It is an idea, a general principle underlying the slew of communal, civic, and youth movements . . . in the Niger Delta . . . particularly in the Ijaw-speaking areas.”⁵⁸ MEND is certainly not a physically bounded entity with a coherent hierarchical structure and fixed position within the Nigerian state. MEND, rather, operates as a supra-organization within multifarious insurgent organizations and as an extra-state insurgent collectivity. Within scores of insurgent groups, gangs, cults, and militias in the Niger Delta, MEND is *sui generis*.

Consequently, the notion that MEND is an idea⁵⁹ encapsulates MEND's operational logic. As sovereign of the creeks, with members who also move about with impunity in major cities,⁶⁰ MEND eludes easy description or delimitation. MEND is the product of a multiorganizational field⁶¹ operating in and through a host of insurgent groups.

Second, it is imperative for MEND that its leaders also lack a public identity. For instance, when Farah Dagogo, the overall field commander of MEND, and other commanders in Rivers state accepted the presidential amnesty offer,

they were immediately ushered out by MEND. All those individuals were replaced by unknown commanders.⁶² By accepting the amnesty offer, these commanders had acquired a public identity, with their faces appearing in newspapers across the country, in stark contrast to the universally masked figure of MEND fighters. As such, they ceased to be useful to MEND.

With a loose organizational structure and no single recognized leader, MEND is difficult to track. This polymorphism presents a conundrum to the Nigerian state. As in many new wars, it is hard for the army to combat a largely unknown and unidentifiable enemy. The JTF spokesperson points out that the army is

fighting with groups that are almost anonymous. . . . Someone wants to pose as a defenceless civilian for 30 days of the month and on the last day, he appears, and you assume that he is that harmless civilian you have been seeing. He appears on the 31st of that month and attacks you. That is the nature of the crisis.⁶³

Set up principally by the leaders of various independent insurgent groups for maximum media impact, MEND is an umbrella coalition that takes credit for the actions of different groups.⁶⁴ It is composed of a vast network of cliques that has managed to entrench itself at the center of a conglomeration of nodal insurgent groups with multifaceted organizational structures, commands, and loyalties. This gives MEND the capacity to sanction, desanction, and resanction independent insurgent groups and their acts. Each group can operate using MEND's name, but may also choose to act alone.⁶⁵ In keeping with the dynamics of the new warfare, this ensures that "fighting is not restricted to a small sector but may flare up anywhere."⁶⁶ For instance, Jomo Gbomo points out that the January 8, 2010, attack on the Chevron Makaraba pipeline was "sanctioned by MEND but did not involve" MEND operatives.⁶⁷ One activist with expansive contacts in the Delta explains:

We have splinter organizations because you cannot trust the Nigerian situation. Ken Saro Wiwa was killed, Adaka Boro was killed, Asari (Dokubo) was almost killed. So, if there was only one group, it would have been easier going after the leader, get him executed. As they say, if you kill the head, the body will scatter.⁶⁸

The plurality of MEND's leadership is partially attributable to the presence of multiple independent insurgent groups. With a stupefying number of commanders and generals at any given time, the job of the JTF is all the more complicated.

MEND seems to have learned lessons from the insurgencies—peaceful and violent—of the past. For example, Adaka Boro's 12-day insurgency in the 1960s was, by his own admission, a "much publicised revolution."⁶⁹ As a prominent activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa had a significant public image in Nigeria prior to the Ogoni uprising. The tragic death of Boro during the Nigeria Civil War under

contentious circumstances and the hanging of Wiwa are a testament to the risks of a highly public opposition, both violent and nonviolent. Consequently, MEND shrouds its leadership in secrecy.

Fluid Membership

A corollary to the previous point is that MEND's membership is extremely fluid. This is a fundamental characteristic of the entire insurgency in the Niger Delta and not uniquely a quality of MEND. A few insurgent groups have become apprenticeship schemes for manufacturing yet more insurgent groups. The parent insurgent groups include the NDPVF and the notorious "Camp 5," established by Mr. Government Ekpemupolo, widely known as "Tom Polo." Members often migrate from one group to another with relative ease, doing so for reasons pertaining to the fame of the group, its leadership, or their own personal ambitions. In doing so, insurgents learn different roles or hone a specific skill set.

The career of one major insurgent leader illustrates this point. Henry Bindodogha, founder of the NDFF, was trained under the tutelage of the masters of four different groups in the struggle. In all four groups, Bindodogha was the chief priest. His role was to pour libations and seek spiritual protection from the ancestors (for example, by giving each of the insurgents a bath) so they might return safely from their exploits. He served in this capacity in Asari Dokubo's group in Rivers state. He left Dokubo's NDPVF for Commander Amadabo's camp and later worked with Prince Odolo. Tom Polo's Camp 5 in the Gbaramatu Kingdom was his last apprenticeship center before he founded his own insurgent group in Edo state, which had previously been comparatively immune from insurgencies. At least four other insurgent groups were subsequently established by young men who trained under Bindodogha.

The importance of such a fluid membership cannot be overemphasized. At the height of the insurgency most major militant leaders of independent camps knew one another and often communicated with one another by mobile telephones on a first-name basis. Such trust, built on a long history of interpersonal relations, allows them to share vital intelligence with one another, including information on where to strike next, the strength of the local JTF deployments, and personal contacts with particular JTF operatives (who occasionally cooperate with the militants on the understanding that soldiers would not be attacked).⁷⁰ In addition, a militant group being attacked by the JTF can seek reinforcement from other groups. Again, this symbiotic relationship exists because each camp has members who had worked with a different camp or knew people at another camp. While not suggesting that all the camps work in unison (there are certainly elements of suspicion and competition), the rapport among various leaders has been solidified by the fluid movement of members in and out of different affiliated groups.⁷¹ Such cooperation preceded

MEND and has worked to its advantage. It is also a unique characteristic of the protagonists in new wars that distinguishes them from those of traditional warfare.⁷² The following section demonstrates how a sympathetic public directly and inadvertently lends support to MEND's operations.

Public Sympathy: "There Are Things That Are Worse than Kidnapping"

Mr. Man, I am a militant! Every Niger Deltan is a militant at heart because the people have been pushed to the wall.

—Leader of a women's NGO during a focus group discussion
July 1, 2009, Yenagoa, Bayelsa state

Public support is a basic prerequisite in wars, particularly the new wars.⁷³ The NGO leader quoted was adamant that residents of the Niger Delta are unapologetic about the rise of militancy. Another participant in that discussion argued that kidnapping oil workers benefitted local people by helping raise the profile of the problems in the Niger Delta.⁷⁴ Therefore, the first reason why MEND operatives enjoy significant public support in the Delta and garners many sympathizers in southern Nigeria is arguably the decades of state neglect of the Niger Delta region. The fact that a good number of people identify or empathize with MEND's objectives allows MEND operatives to execute attacks and quickly blend into society.⁷⁵ This is another characteristic of the new wars. MEND is well aware of the sympathy and support it receives from the population in the Niger Delta and across Nigeria, as is evident from their statement: "We thank all patriotic and justice loving citizens of the Niger Delta and Nigeria for their unwavering support, overtly and covertly."⁷⁶ Not to all supporters are comfortable with kidnapping oil workers or detonating car bombs. However, the idea that the Nigerian state caused the unfolding violent confrontation and that the people of the Niger Delta have been forced to react through insurgent groups is not a radical one among the people.

Second, nonviolent activists are also somewhat militant in their approach. For instance, during an interview with an environmental justice activist who was evaluating the risks of his assignment, he noted, "As far as I can die with minimal suffering through one or two bullets, I am fine."⁷⁷ The Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) also exemplifies the comingling of peace advocacy and violent agitation in the Delta. FNDIC was established in 1997 as a nonviolent, prodemocracy organization to achieve equal political space for all Nigerians, particularly the Ijaw-speaking peoples. It has been at the vanguard of campaigns for peace in the Delta, organizing public lectures, seminars, and television programs, to disseminate its nonviolence advocacy. The organization also lobbies for resource control and true federalism. In spite of its nonviolence stance, FNDIC was involved in kidnapping oil workers in 2003 and 2006. This

initially occurred after a JTF gunboat fired on FNDIC members who were protesting an allegedly lopsided exercise to map out electoral constituencies in Warri Southwest local government in Delta state. Members of the FNDIC kidnapped oil workers as part of their protest of a Chevron facility that they accused of having provided logistical support for the JTF attack. The expatriates kidnapped by FNDIC were used as a human shield for the Okerenkoko people on the assumption that the government forces would not shoot foreigners and risk the ire of Western powers.⁷⁸ Utilization of human shields is a routine tactic in new wars. The FNDIC leader Oboko Bello justifies such action by arguing that “there was a war situation. Kidnapping is an act of war if it is used to prosecute a war situation. There are things that are worse than kidnapping . . . [like] military men dropping bombs.”

Third, public sympathy for MEND also reaches the corridors of power. Kingsley Kuku, who is the former Ijaw Youth Congress public relations officer and member of the Presidential Amnesty Committee, observed that: “*MEND is every Ijaw man, MEND is every Ijaw community, MEND is every Niger Delta man* [sic] who feels that there’s injustice. . . . MEND is a platform, it is a spiritual platform that has come to stay” (italics added).⁷⁹ Similarly, Lt. Col. Larry Parkins, commandant of the federal government’s amnesty camp in Obubra, believes the “younger people thought that if they fold their hands they will continue to suffer as their fathers and their fore fathers suffered.”⁸⁰

Consequently, disentangling violent agitators from nonviolent protesters in the Niger Delta struggle is highly problematic and perhaps foolhardy. The crisis in the Niger Delta has culminated in a situation in which the insurgent is in the eye of the beholder. This is not to suggest that everyone bears arms against the state and its oil interests, although a significant proportion is ready to do so.⁸¹ Instead, as is typical of new wars, it accentuates that the line between the insurgent and the noninsurgent is extremely fluid.⁸² JTF spokesperson Lt. Col. Timothy Antigha describes the situation succinctly. He points out that because “the people of the Niger Delta have felt marginalized for a long time, they appear to have given their support to illegalities that are being perpetrated by their sons and daughters in the name of militancy.”⁸³ There are concerns among the public that kidnapping, in particular, has become a mere business venture.⁸⁴

Several factors help to explain why violent and nonviolent agitators are almost intertwined, two of which are worth noting here. First, there is symmetry between the overarching objectives of MEND and nonviolent protesters. For example, MEND presents resource control as its most important objective, which is also true for nonviolent groups. As the objectives are similar, the accompanying protests are occasionally coterminous, as both sides use what they know best to achieve a mutually recognized goal. One nonviolent activist articulates this problem: “We appreciate the emergence of several groups to advance the cause of the struggle and that includes MEND.”⁸⁵

Second, there is a sense that Nigeria's exceptionalism is at play in the Niger Delta region, something that makes adhering to the tenets of nonviolence difficult. Major exponents of nonviolence, such as Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr., would have found Nigeria particularly frustrating as their peaceful methodology ultimately relies on the presence of a listening opposition and sympathetic bystanders. The state executing the Ogoni Nine for their nonviolent protests serves as a recurring caution about the prospects of such approaches in Nigeria. Consequently, even advocates of nonviolent protest in the Delta often remain uncertain of the relevance or efficacy of these tactics within Nigeria.

WELL-OILED MACHINERY: FUNDING THE MEND INSURGENCY

As insurgent groups rarely have the support of legitimate states that may thrive on taxes and international trade,⁸⁶ the former must devise means to generate adequate funds for their activities. Failure to do so may spell death for such an insurgency. For example, the first postcolonial insurgency in the Niger Delta—the Adaka Boro-led insurgency—was plagued by a paucity of funds. Adaka Boro's guerrilla war against the Nigerian state in 1966 started with a capital of only £150.⁸⁷ Boro's troops resorted to extortionist strategies on ordinary citizens in order to support their group.⁸⁸ This led to a loss of public confidence and contributed to the failure of the insurgency twelve days after it began.

The MEND insurgency, in contrast, is financially very well-oiled through four major avenues. First is illegal oil bunkering or theft. Between 2008 and 2009, for instance, over four hundred illegal refineries were discovered and destroyed by the JTF. On March 26, 2009, over one hundred such refineries were destroyed by the JTF in a single operation.⁸⁹ The following excerpt from a conversation with an ex-insurgent is illustrative:

Interviewer: During this period, how much did you make to fund your activities?

Respondent: Yes, sometimes maybe I got four badges of oil.

Interviewer: What's the equivalent to what we can easily—

Respondent: A thousand-tonne badge can take forty tankers of oil.

Interviewer: Forty tankers?

Respondent: Yeah, and that's like twenty million Naira cash (about US\$131,000).⁹⁰

Insurgents have adopted a distinctive price mechanism for oil in the creeks called the "bush price." A tanker of crude oil, or 33,000 litres, for instance, has a market value of \$8,500 to \$9,000 but is sold for about \$3,000 at the creeks. In cases where munitions are also offered in exchange, the bush price of a tanker of oil could be as low as \$1,300. This discount does not necessarily

represent a huge financial loss to the insurgents as oil is readily available and the bullets are often scarce and badly needed.

Second, some insurgents have developed less complicated contrivances to raise funds. This includes demanding protection money for securing oil facilities, banks, major supermarkets, hotels, and other business organizations in the Niger Delta.⁹¹ Tom Polo is widely believed to have perfected this practice before the amnesty program was introduced in 2009. In turn, he ploughed the profits into several hotels in the Refinery Road area of Warri, Delta state. The authorities were reluctant to bring him to order before the amnesty program as he was also an indispensable political tool.⁹² In the present cabinet of Delta state, for instance, there are at least two commissioners nominated by Tom Polo.⁹³ His younger brother, George Ekpemupolo, is the elected chair of the Warri South local government in the predominantly Ijaw area of Delta state. The patronage system in Nigeria dictates that political appointees and elected persons pay honoraria to their godfathers. Therefore, Tom Polo probably also makes considerable money from his nominees and political protégés.

Third, some affiliates of MEND fund the insurgency through ransom paid by oil companies for their kidnapped staff. Former Inspector General of Police Mike Okiro estimates that militants collected at least \$100 million in ransom between 2006 and 2008.⁹⁴ When oil workers are kidnapped insurgents unconnected with the kidnapping also often serve as middlemen to negotiate the workers' release. Tom Polo again appears to be a major player in this enterprise, largely due to his extensive political reach.

Finally, several insurgents mentioned receiving funds from fellow Niger Deltans at home and in the Diaspora. Asari Dokubo, for instance, claims to receive financial support from concerned Niger Deltans in the United States.⁹⁵ However, no other insurgent corroborated this claim. Some business elites and members of the political class of Niger Delta origins are also believed to surreptitiously fund the insurgency, while local citizens occasionally contribute by discretely providing insurgents with food and temporary shelter.⁹⁶

Clearly, the funding of this insurgency in the Niger Delta exhibits a number of features now present in new wars: funds are drawn from the illegal control of resources, are secured by demanding protection money from businesses, are attained through ransoms of kidnapped victims, and are contributed by local supporters and sympathizers (including some government officials) and from the diaspora.⁹⁷

Multiple Sources of Weapons

One of MEND's strengths has been its ability to secure a steady flow of arms to insurgents. This speaks to the growing "commercialization of military force" in new wars.⁹⁸ As noted, the Warri crisis was a key factor in this regard, as it led to a proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta. Beyond the existing arsenal, MEND has been able to acquire arms from various sources.

With 910,768 square kilometers of land and 13,000 square kilometers of waterways, some of which lead directly to the Atlantic Ocean,⁹⁹ Nigeria's territorial waters and land borders are expansive and are rarely effectively patrolled. Such spaces are amenable to illegal arms transportation.¹⁰⁰ The pervasive illegal oil bunkering in the Delta helps to fund this arms proliferation as shipments often arrive in the creeks in the form of the lethal modern trade of arms for oil.¹⁰¹

Two major sets of actors are involved in this trade. The first are the international arms merchants found in all conflict-prone regions of the world.¹⁰² On Tuesday October 26, 2010, for instance, the Nigerian Port Authority agents in Lagos confiscated an Iranian vessel for shipping thirteen containers of arms disguised as "building materials" to Nigeria.¹⁰³ Some of the impounded items included mortar shells, 107 mm artillery rockets, grenades, and rocket launchers. The second set of actors is local merchants with established networks of arms procurement in countries as far away as China. While most of these businessmen and women are unknown, one prominent Nigerian involved in the illegal arms business at a global level—traversing at a minimum South Africa, China, and Nigeria—is MEND's Henry Okah, who is currently facing trial in South Africa for arms trafficking and bombings in Nigeria. NDPVF leader Asari Dokubo refers to Henry Okah as the "Master of Arms."¹⁰⁴ Local arms merchants also include some women in Nigeria who supply bullets to the insurgents at prohibitive prices.¹⁰⁵

Insurgents also buy arms from well-placed Nigerian military sources.¹⁰⁶ For instance, on February 11, 2008, five military officers, a sergeant, two corporals, six lance corporals, and one private were court-martialed for stealing arms and ammunition from army depots and selling them to criminal gangs in neighboring countries and insurgent groups in the Niger Delta.¹⁰⁷ Officially, over seven thousand military assault rifles, submachine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades were stolen between 2003 and 2007.

MEND affiliates also acquire weapons from attacks on police officers and soldiers. Insurgents occasionally raid police stations to cart away arms and ammunition, leading some police commissioners to stop storing arms in vulnerable police stations.¹⁰⁸ Police and army personnel are sometimes supposedly stabbed on the streets so that their weapons can be stolen.¹⁰⁹

Finally, there is a thriving local illegal arms manufacturing industry in Nigeria. The southeast region of Nigeria is at the vanguard of this illicit business, although local blacksmiths have manufactured guns for hunting and the security of communities and kingdoms since the earliest available records. Arms manufactured in Aba, Abia state and Onitsha, Anambra state are effective and important tools in the insurgency.¹¹⁰ The relative proximity of the southeast to the Niger Delta region ensures that if foreign arms merchants falter, local entrepreneurs fill the void.

Media Relations

In conflicts of this nature, there is always propaganda. The first casualty is the truth . . . in the conflict in the Niger Delta the militants have had the upper hand in propaganda.

—General Sarkin Yaki Bello, JTF Commander

The media plays a central role in warfare of any kind. This is particularly salient in asymmetrical warfare. As Mao Tse-Tung pointed out: “Guerrilla leaders spend a great deal more time in organisation, instruction, agitation and propaganda work than they do fighting, for their most important job is to win over the people.”¹¹¹ MEND understands the micromechanics of the media, strategically using media coverage for its own purposes.¹¹² Their manipulation of the media compelled a governor in the Delta region to describe MEND as a “media creation.”

MEND benefits tremendously from having an articulate spokesperson, who goes by the pseudonym “Jomo Gbomo.” Gbomo strategically releases press statements in the form of e-mails to select media organizations and scholars around the world. Generally, MEND notifies those on its listserv before carrying out major attacks, especially bombings, something that often ensures wide global coverage by media organizations, such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation, Bloomberg News, Al-Jazeera, the *Financial Times* of London, and the *New York Times*. Second, informing subscribers to the listserv of impending acts increases the public’s awe of MEND, particularly when those acts are carried out at the stated time and date.

MEND’s official statements combine lucid prose with contrasting metaphors, sharp diction, and a command of English indicative of a formal education. The degree of articulation in MEND’s e-mails has been widely admired, even by people who fundamentally disagree with MEND’s mode of operation,¹¹³ something that gives an intellectual gloss to an essentially violent struggle.

The almost fairy-tale example of Tom Polo demonstrates how MEND uses the media. Tom Polo is arguably the foremost insurgent in the Niger Delta. Many ex-insurgents speak of drawing inspiration from Tom Polo, whom most have never met. His involvement in killing eighteen soldiers in an attack before the amnesty program in 2009 is only one of Tom Polo’s many alleged crimes. Although barely literate, Tom Polo worked with FNDIC as mobilization officer. FNDIC’s media coordinator, Bulou Custom, is blunt in his assessment that “we created Tom Polo.”¹¹⁴ Custom wrote many newspaper articles in Tom Polo’s name and ensured adequate syndication in the media through his network. Although FNDIC dissociates itself from the violence perpetrated by Tom Polo, the FNDIC president and spokesperson agree that they manufactured the Tom Polo brand through relentless press releases that bolstered his image and publicized his activities.¹¹⁵ Alongside others in FNDIC, this helped to transform a “very purposeful” and “cool headed boy” into a cult figure.¹¹⁶

The propaganda efforts of MEND are also greatly benefitted by the fact that the JTF authorities have adopted a position whereby they are only minimally involved in proactive attempts to frame the issues in the media. Instead, they have adopted a stance of “reactive press releases”¹¹⁷ or responding on an ad hoc basis to specific incidents, confirming or denying figures and reports put out by MEND. Such a strategy seems to cede the initiative to MEND, providing them with an unparalleled luxury of operating in an essentially noncompetitive field in their attempts to win the battle of wits, hearts, and minds in the Delta struggle.

The Niger Delta Creeks

Scant scholarly attention has been paid to the significance of the creeks in the MEND insurgency. This is rather surprising considering that Mao was unequivocal in arguing that the operational base of groups engaged in asymmetrical warfare must be located in “isolated and difficult terrain.”¹¹⁸ Mountainous regions, waterways, and creeks contribute to the emergence of social bandits.¹¹⁹ For example, the geographical terrain of Sardinia is believed to be a major contributor to kidnapping in Italy.¹²⁰ One of us has elsewhere analyzed how the creeks have been “symbolically transformed to a transcendental space” by MEND.¹²¹ This is relevant to our investigation.

First, for all intents and purposes, the creeks are largely beyond the reach of the Nigerian state. The consequence is that the legal architecture of the Nigerian state as embodied in the criminal codes, the police, and the courts is effectively suspended. This, however, does not imply a lawless atmosphere because groups such as MEND tend to develop and implement their own moral codes for regulating the behavior of members.¹²²

Second, “the creeks represent an ideational space and locus of strategic initiatives for planning insurgent activities: how to generate revenue, sphere of influence of each insurgent group, political consciousness and so on.”¹²³ Included in this category are operational activities like mapping out specific oil infrastructure as targets of attacks. This is a complex ideational economic that requires considering many delicate factors. For MEND insurgents, thoughtful consideration must be given to factors such as whose oil infrastructure to attack, with a general preference for foreign-owned ones in order to generate publicity.¹²⁴ They must also consider what countries potential kidnap victims come from, as they prefer Western targets. Serious consideration is also given to the level of security at potential targets.

Consequently, MEND’s tactical expression is overwhelmingly influenced by its environment. Most of its attacks are directed at oil infrastructure and other energy-related assets. These provide MEND with a potent platform to publicize its grievances and garner international attention. MEND’s official statements underscore the importance of directing attacks at the sites and symbols of oil

extraction. In 2009, for example, MEND released a statement arguing that the group was resuming “its hostilities against the Nigerian oil industry, the Nigerian armed forces and its collaborators.”¹²⁵ The use of the creeks as the spatial location of calculated attacks on the oil industry has major repercussions for the Nigerian government, as it leads to major losses in revenue for a petro-state that relies on the Niger Delta’s oil for over 85 percent of revenues.

Third, the impact of this space is felt globally. MEND’s activities at the creeks affect global oil prices, as the group often reminds the world.¹²⁶ Consequently, as spatial location of guerrilla groups is crucial, the capacity to leverage the terrain represented by the creeks is a fundamental part of MEND’s operations.¹²⁷

In the next section, we identify ways in which characteristics of the new war model find resonance in the Delta insurgency.

NIGERIA’S OIL INSURGENCY AND THE NEW WAR MODEL

The MEND-led oil insurgency in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria has characteristics of the new war model in at least six major ways. First, new wars thrive on the erosion of the state’s monopoly of the use of force.¹²⁸ The Delta insurgency is no exception. MEND insurgents and other groups have liberalized the state’s monopoly on the use of force in Nigeria’s Delta region. As this article indicates, insurgents rely on a plethora of means for acquiring sophisticated weapons, including private entities and corrupt state agents. Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish combatants and non-combatants in the Delta, as agents of the Nigerian state responsible for maintaining security readily admit. This key quality of new wars has been invigorated in the Delta by the well-documented decline in the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. Second, the Delta insurgency contains elements that are congruent with the notion of the political economy of new wars.¹²⁹ These include the participation of a concatenation of actors: some ruling elites, top military brass, traditional rulers, and foreign merchants, among others, embroiled in the insurgency as an end in itself—an innovative method for survival in a perpetually depressed economy.

Third, the riverine asymmetrical warfare in the Niger Delta speaks volumes about how new wars are being conducted and how these wars differ from traditional warfare. What we learn from the MEND operation is that this is a destatized war¹³⁰ involving well-armed government forces against a coalition of nonstate actors, which has a loose structure and anonymity of leadership and which is not bound by traditional rules of engagement on the battlefields. The plurality of battlefields—oil infrastructure in the Delta region, targets in Abuja, Lagos, and several other cities—help the insurgents to balance the asymmetry of the war. The major battlefield is located in an inhospitable and difficult terrain which, more often than not, gives the insurgents an advantage

over the government's military forces. It is a physical and social space in which insurgents can simultaneously be kidnappers, illegal oil bunkerers, and executioners as well as suppliers of social goods, such as scholarships, roads, and electricity. This blurring of the distinction between wars, organized crime, major violations of human rights, and philanthropy is an important feature of the new wars model.

Fourth, as is the case with many of the new wars, the battle is being fought over natural resources and insurgents have a level of control, albeit illegal. The conflict in the Niger Delta illuminates the issue of resource curse.¹³¹ Nigeria exhibits the bewildering paradox of plenty: despite the abundance of oil, the country is not experiencing the level of development that should be possible. It is worth reiterating that the wealth of the Niger Delta has not trickled down to the people of the region and has led to major grievances against the state and oil corporations. The focus that the Nigerian government has placed on oil revenues has meant that other economic and social sectors are neglected. This issue, combined with the volatility of the global commodity markets, the mismanagement of the economy by the Nigerian government, and the systemic corruption that prevails at every level of governance, lends further fodder to the notion of the resource curse.

Fifth, many nonstate actors in new wars benefit from closer ideational, economic, and cultural integration associated with globalization.¹³² MEND has a regular cyber presence and participates in the global flows inherent in information technology. Between September 5, 2009, and October 19, 2010, Jomo Gbomo issued 29 official statements (or just over two e-mails per month) on behalf of MEND. This figure does not include private correspondence with journalists and researchers seeking information or clarification.¹³³ MEND has managed to be more technologically savvy than the multiple security agencies in Nigeria tracking its Internet use and attempting to access its e-mail. The impunity with which MEND issues warnings about attacks and communicates with journalists and researchers without the arrest of the largely apparitional Jomo Gbomo is an indication that they know a few technological things the Nigerian authorities do not. MEND's use of information technology enhances its propaganda machinery. Propaganda has always been a tool of warfare. But the new wars, such as the one being fought in the Niger Delta, rely heavily on the utilization and manipulation of the media, particularly new media. The impact that a cyber-presence and the technological sophistication of MEND have had in terms of the success of the insurgency against the Nigerian government is something that ought to be studied in more detail. The literature currently focuses on economics, especially electronic transfer of funds to nonstate actors across the world.¹³⁴

Sixth, the oil insurgency in the Delta highlights the importance of identity politics in new wars.¹³⁵ Identity politics—the “claim to power on the basis of a particular identity”—is a defining feature of new wars.¹³⁶ Based on her

research in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kaldor argues that such identities may be based on clan, national origin, religion, or linguistic affiliation.¹³⁷ There is ample evidence suggesting that identity politics have played a role in the Delta insurgency. The delimitation of Delta peoples into specific states in the federation, beginning with the establishment of the Midwest state on August 9, 1963, has enabled the mobilization of geopolitical identities and a substratum of cultural identity. The result is the intensification of identity politics.¹³⁸ Combined with significant political, religious, and socioeconomic problems and inequitable distribution of resources in a manner that disproportionately favors the three major ethnic groups, the consequence has been the “supertribalization”¹³⁹ of young people in Nigeria.

The Warri crisis of March 1997 is one of several ethnic clashes among minorities in the Delta. However, a new form of collective identity—the Niger Delta people—has since emerged in a region of approximately 40 ethnic groups who speak over 250 languages and dialects in 13,329 settlements.¹⁴⁰ Insurgents now believe that conflict among the ethnic groups in the Delta region was not the struggle.¹⁴¹ The real struggle appears to be against oil corporations, the Nigerian state, and the Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria, which MEND equates with the Nigerian state. This is significant because Adaka Boro, who led the first postindependence insurgency against the Nigerian state considered the assassinated Prime Minister Sir Tafawa Balewa, a Fulani, and his party, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), as the “only protector of the Ijaws.”¹⁴² However MEND has since taken a different trajectory in framing its activities. In an e-mail statement MEND states that “*the lands of the people of the Niger Delta was stolen by the oil companies and Northern Nigeria with the stroke of a pen. . . . The Niger Delta has been partitioned into oil blocks which have been distributed amongst mostly Northerners while indigenes of the Niger Delta can barely survive*”¹⁴³ (italics in original)."

Despite the discursive focus on Northern Nigeria dominated by the Hausa-Fulani, MEND generally kidnaps expatriate oil workers, rather than Nigerians, and targets oil infrastructure. In addition, although MEND purports to fight for the people of the Niger Delta, most of its members are from the Ijaw-speaking peoples.¹⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Despite the relevance of the new war thesis in analyzing the MEND-led oil insurgency in Nigeria, there are four important areas that suggest that this approach must be applied to the Delta insurgency with caution. First, unlike many new wars in which the use of child soldiers is endemic—estimated at 300,000 on a global scale¹⁴⁵—there does not appear to be any widespread recruitment, forced or voluntary, of children-fighters in the Delta insurgency. Of the 42 insurgents who participated in this study, only one claimed to have

voluntarily¹⁴⁶ joined an insurgent camp at the age of 17. Others stated that they were over 18 years old at the time of joining different groups.

Second, the “barbarism thesis” in new wars¹⁴⁷ seems to have little empirical validity in the Delta crisis. The barbarism thesis proposes that new wars create avenues for indiscriminate violence against the civilian population and widespread sexual violence against women. To be sure, MEND’s activities have led to civilian deaths in cities like Warri and Abuja. However, there seems to be a relatively more cautious approach to civilian casualties in MEND’s insurgency than the new wars literature suggests. MEND often issues what may be considered proactive warnings to civilians against going to specific locations marked for bombings so as not to lose their lives or limbs.¹⁴⁸

Third, several insurgent groups explicitly prohibit the presence of women at their camps while also forbidding sexual interactions with women in order not to nullify the ostensible spiritual fortification conferred on fighters during ritualistic ceremonies superintended mostly by postmenopausal women. The consequence is that systematic sexual violence by insurgents against women in the Delta has rarely come up in academic or lay analysis.¹⁴⁹ This is not to suggest that there has been no incidence of sexual violence against women. Rather, it is submitted that this can seldom be construed as a feature of the Delta insurgency. Paradoxically, those accused of sexual violence by victims, oil-producing communities, the media, human rights organizations, and scholars studying the Delta crisis have often been government security agents.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, sexual violence against women by nonstate actors is not necessarily universal,¹⁵¹ contrary to the presupposition of much of the new wars literature. Therefore, the Delta insurgency suggests an important caveat to the “autonomization of violence.”¹⁵²

The apparent nonuse of child soldiers, absence of indiscriminate violence against the civilian population, and arguable rarity of sexual violence against women by insurgents, perhaps speak to the geographical location of the creeks, where most insurgent activities take place. The creeks are located in the Delta region, which is predominantly populated by the people for whom insurgents claim they are fighting. Consequently, it is conceivable that insurgents are careful not to be seen as perpetrating violence against their own people. This is fundamental to retaining the tacit and explicit support of the people.¹⁵³

Fourth, the Delta insurgency also demonstrates that a wholesale presupposition that new wars are driven solely or principally by economic motives¹⁵⁴ or symbolize the continuation of economics by other means¹⁵⁵ is overstated. This study aligns with the growing research suggesting the need to be cautious about the greed-grievance theoretical schemata.¹⁵⁶ It is submitted that a multifactorial approach that considers the historical context, political power struggle, and the role of religion, and culture, among others, provides a more nuanced explanation of the Delta situation.¹⁵⁷

In the final analysis, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly attempts to understand the insurgency in the oil-rich Delta region of Nigeria. There is overwhelming evidence that the Delta situation has grievous consequences both within Nigeria and beyond its shores.¹⁵⁸ While legitimate questions can and should be raised about MEND's mode of operation, its activities guarantee that certain steps are taken and fundamental tokens presented to the Delta people. As Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr. points out, MEND insurgents and other actors revolted against the Nigerian state using the tool with which they had been equipped—violence—in the same way that Ken Saro-Wiwa used his education and contacts to internationalize the Ogoni struggle.¹⁵⁹ Whether there would be another catharsis akin to the episodes between 2003 and 2010 remains unclear, but probable. Chances are that the amnesty program in the Niger Delta, introduced by the Nigerian state, may not bring about the desired results until the problems associated with resource control and environmental justice are overcome.

NOTES

1. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 27). "Bomb Alert in Abuja!!!" Friday October 1, 2010.
2. Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
3. See Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
4. Münkler, *The New Wars*.
5. Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Worcester: The Trinity Press, 1969).
6. Interviewees 12 and 10, JTF Commander General Bello and spokesperson Lt. Col. Antigha, respectively. General Bello compares the battle in the Delta with the U.S. experience in Vietnam.
7. Interviewee 10.
8. See Mats Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'? Global Economic Change and the Study of Civil War," *Global Governance* 9, no. 4 (2003): 477–502; Stathis N. Kalyvas, "New' and 'Old' Civil Wars. A Valid Distinction?" *World Politics* 54, no. 1 (2001): 99–118; Patrick A. Mello, "In Search of New Wars: The Debate about a Transformation of War," *European Journal of International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2010): 297–309; M. L. R. Smith, "Guerrillas in the Mist. Reassessing Strategy and Low Intensity Warfare," *Review of International Studies* 29, no. 1 (2003): 19–37.
9. Elias Courson, "MEND: Political Marginalization, Repression, and Petro-Insurgency in the Niger Delta," *African Security* 4, no. 1 (2011): 20–43; Elias Courson, "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND): Political Marginalization, Repression and Petro-Insurgency in the Niger Delta," Discussion Paper 47 (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2009); Judith Burdin Asuni, "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta," Working Paper, Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/understanding-armed-groups-niger-delta/p20146> (accessed April 2012); Ike Okonta, "Behind the Mask: Explaining the Emergence of the MEND Militia in Nigeria's Oil-Bearing Niger Delta," Niger Delta: Economies of Violence Working Papers,

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10. Watts, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate?" 643.

11. Augustine Ikelegbe, "The Economy of Conflict in the Oil Rich Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 208–234; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Resource Rents, Governance, and Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (2005): 625–633.

12. Courson, "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)," 7.

13. Hamisu Muhammed, "Nigeria Gets \$200.34 Billion in 10 Years from Oil," *Daily Trust*, April 1, 2010.

14. Aderoju Oyefusi, "Oil and the Probability of Rebel Participation among Youths in the Niger Delta of Nigeria," *Journal of Peace Research* 45, no. 4 (2008): 539–555; Aderoju Oyefusi, "Oil and the Propensity to Armed Struggle in the Niger Delta of Nigeria," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4194, April 1, 2007, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=979666> (accessed January 2008); Julia Maxted, "Exploitation of Energy Resources in Africa and the Consequences for Minority Rights," *Journal of Developing Societies* 22, no. 1 (2006): 29–37; Augustine Ikelegbe, "Civil Society, Oil and Conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Ramifications of Civil Society for a Regional Resource Struggle," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39, no. 3 (2001): 437–469; Minabere Ibelema, "Nigeria: The Politics of Marginalization," *Current History* May (2000): 211–214.

15. Watts, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate?"; Augustine Ikelegbe, "Engendering Civil Society: Oil, Women Groups and Resource Conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, no. 2 (2005): 241–270; Ikelegbe, "The Economy of Conflict"; Clifford Bob, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media and International Activism* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005); Clifford Bob, "Political Process Theory and Transnational Movements: Dialectics of Protest among Nigeria's Ogoni Minority," *Social Problems* 49, no. 3 (2002): 395–415.

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18. Interviewee 11, Asari Dokubo. Personal interview, July 2010, Abuja, Nigeria.

19. Benjamin Okaba, "Political Economy of Militancy, Petroleum Pipeline Vandalisation and Hostage-Taking in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," Monograph of lecture delivered at the Niger Delta Students Association (NANDA) Meeting, Port Harcourt, June 27, 2009.

20. Michael Watts, "The Sinister Political Life of Community: Economies of Violence and Governable Spaces in the Niger Delta, Nigeria," Niger Delta: Economies of Violence Working Papers, Working Paper No. 3 (Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 2004b).

21. Shola Omotola, "'Liberation Movements' and Rising Violence in the Niger Delta: The New Contentious Site of Oil and Environmental Politics," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 1 (2010): 36–54; Watts, "Petro-Insurgency or Criminal Syndicate?"

22. Okonta, "Behind the Mask."

23. Courson, "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)."
24. Courson, "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)."
25. *The Punch*, May 16, 2009.
26. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 20), "Bomb Alert in Warri," Monday March 15, 2010.
27. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 21), "Bomb Blast Update," Monday March 15, 2010.
28. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 27), "Bomb Alert in Abuja!!!" Friday October 1, 2010.
29. For more information on this amnesty program see <http://www.nigerdeltaamnesty.org/> (accessed November 2011).
30. For more on this kidnapping episode, see "American Hostages to FG: It's Inhuman to Treat Niger-Deltans This Badly!" *Saturday Vanguard*, May 19 2007: 1, 5.
31. The seemingly seamless incorporation of ex-wanted "criminals" into the body politick is the focus of another paper.
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35. See Ukoha Ukiwo, "From 'Pirates' to 'Militants': A Historical Perspective on Anti-state and Anti-oil Company Mobilization among the Ijaw of Warri, Western Niger Delta," *African Affairs* 106, no. 425 (2007): 587–610; Okonto, "Behind the Mask."

36. Ukiwo, "From 'Pirates' to 'Militants'"; Willink Commission, Colonial Office, "The Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into the Fears of Minorities and the Means for Allaying Them" (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1958).
37. Willink Commission, Colonial Office, "The Report," iii.
38. See Nigeria, *Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta* (Port Harcourt: Prelyn Fortunes, 2008), 131.
39. See R. T. Akinyele, "States Creation in Nigeria: The Willink Report in Retrospect," *African Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (1996): 71–94.
40. Akinyele, "States Creation in Nigeria."
41. Isaac Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*, ed. Tony Tebekaemi (Benin: Idodo Umeh Publishers, 1982).
42. Interviewee 11, personal interview, Abuja, July 2010.
43. Interviewees 24–36.
44. T. A. Imobighe, "Warri Crisis in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta*, eds. T. A. Imobighe, Bassey Celestine, and Judith Asuni (Ibadan: Spectrum, 2002): 36–52.
45. Interviewee 34, militant 12, a reggae artiste at one of the major militant camps, personal interview, August 2010, Obubra camp Cross River State.
46. Interviewee 20, militant 1.
47. Interviewee 19, personal interview during a private tour of the NDFF camp, Edo state, August 2010.
48. Doug McAdam, *The Political Process and the Development of the Black Insurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 48.
49. Interviewees 38 and 39, Bolou Custom, media coordinator of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), personal interview, Warri Delta state, August 2010.
50. Asuni, "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta."
51. Interviewee 22, Honourable Kingsley Kuku, member Presidential Amnesty Committee and former public relations officer of Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), personal interview, Obubra camp, August 2010.
52. Interviewee 1, Onengiya Erekosima, president Niger Delta Non-violence Movement, personal interview, Port Harcourt, July 2009.
53. Interviewee 4.
54. See Asuni, "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta."
55. Samuel Griffiths II, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Anchor Press/DoubleDay, 1978), 17–18, 23.
56. Ibrahim Abdullah and Patrick Muana, "The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone: A Revolt of the Lumpenproletariat," in *African Guerrillas*, ed. Christopher Clapham (Oxford: James Curry, 1998), 177.
57. Asuni, "Understanding the Armed Groups of the Niger Delta"; Okonta, "Behind the Mask."
58. *Ibid.*, 10.
59. Okonta, "Behind the Mask."
60. *Ibid.*

61. See Bert Klandermans, "The Social Construction of Protest and Multi-organisational Fields," in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 77–103.
62. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 5), "Statement by Out-going MEND Commander." Saturday October 3, 2009.
63. Interviewee 10, Lt. Col. Timothy Antigha, coordinator of the Joint Media Campaign Centre [JMCC] of the JTF, personal interview in Abuja July 2010.
64. Interviewee 1, Onengiya Erekosima, founder Niger Delta Non-Violent Movement, personal interview, Port Harcourt, June 2009, interviewees 11 and 19.
65. Okonta, "Behind the Mask."
66. Münkler, *The New Wars*, 12.
67. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 14), "Chevron Makaraba Pipeline Attack," Saturday January 9, 2010.
68. Interviewee 4, Morris Alagoa, project officer, Niger Delta Resource Centre, personal interview in Yenagoa Bayelsa state, July 2009.
69. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*, 95.
70. Interviewee 19.
71. Interviewee 19. Bindodogha points out that there was greater trust and cooperation among various leaders while the militants were in the trenches than after they had accepted the government's amnesty program.
72. See Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?"
73. Griffiths II, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*.
74. Focus Group 3 (representatives of two women-focused NGOs). Yenagoa, Bayelsa state, July 1, 2009.
75. Okonta, "Behind the Mask."
76. Gomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 15) Friday January 29, 2010.
77. Interviewee 4.
78. Interviewee 38. Rather tellingly, the current edition of the "Non-violence Approach" publication is titled "One Man One Vote by any Means Necessary." See Oboko Bello, "One Man One Vote by Any Means Necessary," Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities Nonviolence Approach series 07 (Warri: Eregha Publishers, 2010).
79. Interviewee 22, member Presidential Amnesty Committee, personal interview at the militant rehabilitation camp in Obubra, Cross River state, August 2010. Kuku is now presidential adviser on the Niger Delta and overseas the Amnesty Program.
80. Interviewee 16, Lt. Colonel Larry Parkins, commandant of the militant rehabilitation camp in Obubra, Cross River state, personal interview, August 2010.
81. See Oyefusi, "Oil and the Probability of Rebel Participation"; Oyefusi, "Oil and the Propensity to Armed Struggle."
82. See Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?"; Mello, "In Search of New Wars."
83. Interviewee 10, General Sarkin Yakin Bello, the JTF Commander, responsible for quelling insurgency in the region agrees that the Niger Delta people have not been treated fairly by the Nigerian state, personal interview, August 2010.
84. Interviewee 1, Onengiya Erekosima, president, Niger Delta Non-Violence Movement (NDNVM), Port Harcourt, 2009.

85. Interviewee 37.
86. Münkler, *The New Wars*, 17.
87. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*.
88. Ibid.
89. *The Punch*, March 27, 2009, 9.
90. Interviewee 20.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
93. Interviewee 2, a professor and activist in the Niger Delta, personal interview, July 2009. The activist did not name the militant, but one of the authors of this article found out the name of the insurgent and the names of those nominated (which have been withheld here) during the 2010 field trip.
94. *This Day*, April 1, 2009.
95. Michael Peel, *A Swamp full of Dollars: Pipelines and Paramilitaries at Nigeria's Oil Frontier* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009).
96. Multiple sources. Interviewees 15, 24–37.
97. See Berdal, “How ‘New’ are ‘New Wars’?”; Mello, “In Search of New Wars.”
98. Münkler, *The New Wars*, 16.
99. See the Central Intelligence Agency. “The World Factbook,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html> (updated February 4, 2011).
100. Interviewee 12, General Bello, JTF commander.
101. Interviewees 12 and 10.
102. Interviewee 37.
103. See “Nigeria: Iran Remains Quiet Over Seized Arms Ship,” *Afrik News*, November 2, 2010, <http://www.afrik-news.com/article18430.html> (accessed November 2010). There are conflicting reports over the intended destination of the shipment. The Israeli government believes the arms were for Hamas, a group generally regarded as a terrorist organization by the United States and its allies. Hamas denies the Israeli government claim.
104. See Asari Dokubo, “Me, Henry Okah ‘Jomo Gbomo,’ Judith Asuni and the Niger Delta Insurgency,” <http://saharareporters.com/interview/asari-dokubo-me-henry-okahjomo-gbomo-judith-asuni-and-niger-delta-insurgency> (accessed December 2010).
105. Interviewee 20.
106. Interviewee 12, General Bello, JTF commander.
107. “Gun Deal: 5 Army Officers, 10 Others Face Court Martial,” *Nigerian Daily News*, February 11, 2008, <http://ndn.nigeriadailynews.com/templates/default.aspx?a=6160&template=print-article.htm> (accessed November 2, 2010).
108. Interviewee 12, General Bello, JTF commander.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid.
111. Griffiths II, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, 27.
112. Okonta, “Behind the Mask.”

113. Ibid.
114. Interviewee 37, FNDIC media coordinator Bolou Custom, personal interview, August 2010, Warri Delta state.
115. Interviewees 38 and 37.
116. Interviewee 38.
117. Interviewee 12.
118. Griffiths II, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, 17.
119. Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Norton and Company, 1959).
120. I. F. Caramazza and Ugo Leone, *Phenomenology of Kidnappings in Sardina: Towards an International Perspective of a Local Crime Problem* (Rome: The United Nations Social Defence Research Institute, 1984).
121. Temitope Oriola, "The Delta Creeks, Women's Engagement, and Nigeria's Oil Insurgency," *British Journal of Criminology* 52, no. 3 (2012): 534–555.
122. Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, "Male Juvenile Delinquency as Group Behaviour," in ed. James F. Short, *The Social Fabric of the Metropolis: Contributions of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 252–282.
123. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks," 541.
124. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks."
125. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 7) "Resumption of Hostilities," Thursday October 15 2009.
126. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (Number 13) "Terrorist Attempt on Delta Flight 253," December 27 2009.
127. Griffiths II, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*.
128. Mello, "In Search of New Wars," p. 298.
129. Ikelegbe, "The Economy of Conflict"; Collier and Hoeffler, "Resource Rents, Governance, and Conflict."
130. See Münkler, *The New Wars*; Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
131. Ghazvinian, *Untapped*; Sala-i-Martin and Subramanian, "Addressing the Natural Resource Curse."
132. Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?"
133. One of the authors of this article received a private e-mail from Jomo Gbomo on Monday August 24, 2009, in response to his request for inclusion in the MEND listserv, having been introduced by an activist in the Niger Delta.
134. Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?"
135. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
136. Ibid., 6.
137. Ibid. The import of ethnoreligious loyalties and identity politics generally constitutes a major point of divergence between Kaldor (1999) and Münkler (2005). Kaldor considers identity politics fundamental to new wars. Münkler (2005), however, argues that although such factors are significant, focusing on them paints a romantic picture of new wars and shrouds the inherent economic motives of major players.

138. See Ikelegbe, "Engendering Civil Society."
139. Eghosa Osaghae, "Explaining the Changing Patterns of Ethnic Politics in Nigeria," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 9, no. 3 (2003): 54–73.
140. Watts, "Blood Oil."
141. Boyloaf (Victor Ben Ebikabowei). Cited in Courson and Courson, "Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)," 18, in an interview with *Sunday Vanguard*, May 25, 2008.
142. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*, 94–95.
143. Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 20), Monday March 15, 2010.
144. See Ukiwo, "From 'Pirates' to 'Militants'"; Okonta, "Behind the Mask."
145. See Mello, "In Search of New Wars," 299.
146. We are aware of the contestedness of the notion of voluntariness in participating in an armed conflict.
147. Mello, "In Search of New Wars", 299; Robert Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).
148. See Jomo Gbomo e-mail statement (number 20), Monday March 15, 2010.
149. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks," 549.
150. Oriola, "The Delta Creeks"; Shola Omotola, "Dissent and State Excesses in the Niger Delta Nigeria," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 2 (2009): 129–145; Emily Lenning and Sara Brightman, "Oil, Rape and State Crime in Nigeria," *Critical Criminology* 17, no. 1 (2009): 35–48; Charles Ukeje, "From Aba to Ugborodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria," *Oxford Development Studies* 32, no. 4 (2004): 605–617; Human Rights Watch, "Nigerian Army Accused of Excessive Force, Rape in the Niger Delta," www.hrw.org/news/1999/12/22/nigerian-army-accused-excessive-force-rape-niger-delta (accessed December 2010).
151. See Dyan Mazurana, Susan McKay, Khristopher Carlson, and Janel Kasper, "Girls in Fighting Forces and Groups: Their Recruitment, Participation, Demobilization, and Reintegration," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2002), 111.
152. See Münkler, *The New Wars*, 3.
153. See Hobsbawm, *Bandits*; Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*.
154. See Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
155. David Keen, "The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars," Introduction, *Adelphi Papers* 38 (1998), 11.
156. See Collier and Hoeffler, "Resource Rents, Governance, and Conflict."
157. Berdal, "How 'New' are 'New Wars'?" 490.
158. Oronto Douglas, Ike Okonta, Dimieari Von Kemedi, and Michael Watts, "Oil and Militancy in the Niger Delta: Terrorist Threat or Another Colombia?" Niger Delta Economies of Violence Working Papers, Working Paper No. 4 (Washington, DC: The United States Institute of Peace, 2004).
159. Interviewee 14, Ken Saro-Wiwa Jr., personal interview, Abuja, August 2010.