With its roots in decades of crude oil production and the attendant crises of mismanagement of oil revenues, the reemergence of armed groups’ in the Niger Delta region in early 2016 marked a return to the ‘business-as-usual’ insurgency that dominated the oil region since the 1990s.

In February 2016, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) claimed responsibility for attacking oil facilities owned by major international oil companies (IOCs). During the same period, the state-owned Nigeria National Petroleum Company (NNPC) reportedly spent N4.023 billion to repair 293 pipeline breaks. These attacks disrupted oil production and forced the IOCs to declare a force majeure, reducing daily oil production from 2.2 million to between 1.6 and 1.7 per million barrels per day. These developments coincided with a national fiscal crisis linked to dwindling global oil prices; from over $100/barrel to around $50/barrel. Without steady gas supplies, the already dire electricity situation nationwide was further compounded by a 2,500 megawatts drop in power generation.

No clues, or a just another lackluster response?

This renewed militancy is coming seven years into the implementation of a Presidential Amnesty Program (PAP) by two successive administrations; first, by Musa Yar’Adua, and upon his untimely death, that of his former Vice-President (who assumed the Presidency), Goodluck Jonathan. The emergence of new armed groups partly suggests that the Amnesty ‘deal’ failed in several respects, to: (1) address the root causes of the lingering crises, (2) dismantle the networks of conflict entrepreneurs, and (3) tame the excesses of the armed groups and oil thieves operating across the region. Of note are groups like the Reformed Niger Delta Avengers (RNDA) as well as the Joint...
Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF). Others included those individuals and groups excluded from the PAP, or initially left stranded following the collapse of patronage networks built around sharing the ‘spoils of oil’ as a result of the termination of ‘security/oil contracts’ awarded by the former administration. Several of such individuals and groups managed to regroup and rebrand themselves as “new” militants.

**Returning to a more purposeful response?**

In spite of the strident rhetoric underscoring government’s resolve to crush the resurgent militancy in the Niger Delta, a clear-cut plan beyond a set of ad-hoc carrot and stick responses is yet to emerge. The deployment of soldiers has, at best, yielded mixed results that confront government with a difficult policy dilemma. While it is slowly recognizing the imperative to embrace constructive dialogue with stakeholders in the region as a strategy for inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding, it remains fixated with a military approach that has previously failed to halt militancy, criminality and general insecurity.

A step in the right direction would therefore be to muster the required political will to rebuild trust with local stakeholders, and devise new approaches towards the medium- and long-term development of the region. Such new approaches should be free of corruption and the influence of divisive local elites and the perverse ways of playing politics. The long-overdue reform of the Nigerian oil and gas sector should also prioritize local employment, and the cleaning up of communities long devastated by oil pollution to enhance the human security of inhabitants of oil producing communities. A key aspect of the reform should include the eventual adoption of the long-drawn out Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB), as the most holistic blueprint capable of bringing sanity to the Nigerian oil sector if implemented with genuine intentions.

Although government announced a new roadmap on 27th October 2016, also known as the Seven Big Wins, and plans to review and overhaul the Amnesty Program, either to reflect new imperatives or with a view to completely winding it down by 2017, a lot will depend on the political will and capacity on the part of government to transform the deeply entrenched status quo.1

In November 2016, President Buhari met with over 50 key stakeholders drawn from the region to solicit support in tackling challenges posed by the resurgent insurgency to the country’s economic mainstay and national security. While opinion remains divided over the relevance of so-called ‘community leaders’ that dominated the meeting, it is unclear if such forums can lead to a comprehensive and sustainable resolution of the deep-seated challenges facing the ordinary citizens of the Niger Delta.

Ultimately, there is an urgent need to build consensus on how to resolve what is becoming a perennial challenge in Nigeria’s oil producing region. The ongoing insurgency is as much a developmental challenge as it is a law and order problem. To facilitate the resolution of the emerging challenges in Nigeria’s oil producing Niger Delta, the following key recommendations are considered pertinent:

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- The Nigerian Federal Government should promptly enact and diligently implement the Petroleum Industry Bill, placing premium on critical investments in infrastructure, job creation, sustainable development and peacebuilding initiatives across the Niger Delta.

- The three tiers of government; at the Federal, State and Local levels, must quickly regain the trust, confidence and buy-in of local communities, particularly that of youth groups, and check the excesses of the Joint Task Force military (JTF) operating in the region.

- The State and Local Governments, as the tiers of government closest to the people, must demonstrate greater sensitivity to as well as fiscal discipline and transparency in relating with local communities and engaging them on priority development issues.

- IOCs, and international partners, must put local communities at the center of development and peacebuilding interventions, and ensure that all their corporate activities maintain fidelity to global best practices.

1These include: the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) and its splinter faction, the Reformed Niger Delta Avengers (RNDA) as well as the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF).