

The war we ordered is here

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By Okey Ndibe

It looks like the war Nigeria's thieving ruling class ordered is finally here.

Last week, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) carried out one of its most daring attacks to date on oil installations. Its militants attacked Shell's deepwater oil field in Bonga. It was, as *Thisday* reported, a "devastating" hit. The attack cut Nigeria's oil output by about ten percent. That's substantial by any measure.

It came at a particularly bad time for the global oil market. Over the last several years, the price of crude oil has exploded upward. In the last two years, the price has spiked dramatically, fueled by growing demand by the new industrializing powerhouses of China and India, and compounded by rising international tension in the Persian Gulf, and the violent convulsions in Nigeria's oil producing hub.

It was no surprise, then, that the Bonga attack resounded globally. On American television networks, analysts discussed the prospective impact of MEND's latest offensive on the already record-bursting price of gasoline. There was a measure of unanimity on one score: prices are bound to creep upward, thanks in part to the Bonga raid.

I didn't hear one analyst talk about the disease that brought on the symptom of incessant attacks on oil installations in

Nigeria. That topic is not sexy enough for American experts—or for their impatient audiences who only want to hear about some magic bullet to shoot down the price of fuel at the pump. Next to their beer and hamburgers—perhaps ahead of them—Americans love their fuel-guzzling SUVs.

Whatever one may think of MEND, the militant group is good at its game. It has mastered the idiom of violence, the only language, unfortunately, that the nation's (mis)ruling elite understands. By resorting to violence, the militants of the Niger Delta have ensured that their story is heard around the world. Their propaganda machinery is excellent. Oil drives the global economy, and no serious nation is going to ignore a group that continually threatens to incapacitate oil infrastructure, and then frequently makes good on the threat. MEND has the ears of the world, and the group's moves often affect the pulse of international markets as well.

Yet, to hear the Nigerian officialdom tell it, MEND is a collection of armed thugs who have set about the business of abduction and blackmail of oil companies. Despite this official narrative, the government has been willing to hold MEND and other militant groups in conversation. Trouble is, the government often comes to these talks with little goodwill and a high dose of insincerity.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who regard MEND as an organization engaged in a laudable struggle for self-determination, a cause known in Nigeria as resource control. There's also a mid-way perception of MEND as a high-minded mission that has fallen in the hands of low-minded, profiteering activists.

Here's my take: MEND is a creation of Nigeria's sustained history of exploitation and injustice. In his prison memoir titled *The Man Died*, Wole Soyinka states that "justice is the first condition of humanity." MEND is a bye product of Nigeria's refusal to plant justice in its soil, and to institute it as the abiding cement of the nation's social, political and economic affairs.

If one word explains the emergence of MEND, and its sinewy resilience, that word is injustice. And that injustice has been perpetrated – and is maintained – by the broad class of Nigeria's "rulers." The militancy in the delta is proof that, in the fullness of time, injustice never has the last word.

Nigeria's misbegotten rulers have financed this war. And it's about time we called what's happening in the thick grooves of the delta by its proper name. It is a war, not isolated skirmishes – nor simply acts of sabotage.

So-called Nigerian leaders order this war each time they stash away ill-gotten cash in American, European or Asian vaults. Each time serving or former public officials, several of them from the Niger Delta, divert millions of dollars of public funds to buy swanky homes in North America, England, France or Dubai, they demand this war. Those officials who

pocket funds budgeted for schools, hospitals, or libraries; those who gorge themselves fat while denying workers their meager salary; those who make a ritual of flying abroad for medical check-ups, but starve Nigerians of the most basic healthcare – they fertilize this war that is threatening to engulf the oil fields.

Too many Nigerian leaders are hijackers. They hijack the nation's resources, and put their loot to self-preening purposes. They spoil themselves with obscene perks and privileges, but deny other Nigerians the minimal benefits that would enable them to live like humans. They throw poor Nigerians in jail for picking pockets for loose change, but garland themselves with national honors and worthless chieftaincy titles after plundering billions of naira from the public treasury. On campuses, they sponsor cults that are bereft of any lofty social ideas. During elections, they arm unemployed youth and commandeer them to the task of scaring and scarring political opponents. They proclaim that only God gives power, and then play god by stealing power in elections that are both expensive and programmed to fail. They turn young, promising female students into part-time prostitutes, fit for orgies of their depraved design.

There's that famous line of Frantz Fanon's in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*: "Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it." It is not controversial to contend that successive generations of Nigerian leaders, as well as their intellectual elite hirelings, have been crass traitors.

One such betrayal is in progress even now. Nigeria has made, and continues to

rake in, a stupendous fortune from rising crude oil prices. But most Nigerians have yet to be touched in any significant, positive fashion by this revenue boom. Nigerian roads remain gutted deathtraps. The nation's healthcare is so scary that Mr. Umaru Yar'Adua had no qualms announcing that he made two trips to Germany to take care of a common cold and reaction to a malaria medication respectively. Yar'Adua's much-promised emergency attention to the power sector appears shelved. Teachers can't impress state and Federal governments to make a substantial investment in the educational sector.

By contrast, those politicians who live within the greed radius of Abuja—as well as its satellite extensions in thirty-six state capitals—are living it up. They lavish unconscionable allowances on themselves for the mediocre work they put in. They make frequent foreign junkets at public expense. They corner choice lands, buy up public-financed establishments at bargain prices, and use fronts to siphon away public funds. Worse, they flaunt their costly acquisitions before pauperized citizens. A nation founded on the dispossession of the many by a tiny, parasitic and unproductive few is a war waiting to explode.

That's why Nigerian soldiers, representing a state that has broken most civic compacts and now acts by coercion and repression, are locked in battle with MEND activists determined to use violence to claim a slice of the wealth they cannot peaceably negotiate.

Last week, Yar'Adua threatened to send the nation's army and security agents after those who breached Bonga. There are those who would argue that the

flexing of military muscle is the right call. I demur. A military offensive in the Niger Delta is a recipe for greater disaster. To begin with, Nigerian soldiers—let's not fool ourselves—are dispirited. They are, after all, victims of the injustice that brought us to this terrible junction.

MEND knows the terrain, and knows that the armed forces can't win. The militants know that Nigeria—and the world—cannot afford the doom that is bound to follow any heightened military operation. That's why they mocked Yar'Adua's threat as "empty" and tagged him "an illegal commander-in-chief of an inept armed forces of Nigeria." That's why the nation's military denied ever receiving a summons to fight.

Yar'Adua may be better served by toning down his hectoring posture. His do-nothing regime has contributed to worsen a bad situation. His advisors ought to tell him to look at the name of the major militant group for a possible solution. Nigeria ought to mend its ways if it wishes to end this war. Nigeria should try enthroning justice for a change. Its leaders should drastically downsize their greed and learn the virtue of delayed gratification.

Restitution is not all within Yar'Adua's powers, but he could take a few symbolic but important steps. For a start, he must mandate Mrs. Farida Waziri to toughen as well as broaden the war against corruption. The perception has gained ground, and Mrs. Waziri has so far done little to dispel it, that she was hired to gut the EFCC and to help some of Yar'Adua's friends, financiers or flatterers off the hook.

Two, Yar'Adua ought to push the National Assembly to approve a significant plan of economic development for the oil producing states—and for the nation as a whole. Three, he should take steps to initiate a sovereign national conference to enable Nigerians to negotiate the terms of their corporate engagement.

On a personal level, he should understand that his corrupt and illegitimate route to Aso Rock is exactly the kind of impunity that exposes a nation's disdain for social and political justice. He must understand his role in ordering this war.

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

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