

**NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA:  
DEFINING OUR FUTURE, OUR STRATEGY**

A WELCOME ADDRESS

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By

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AT THE

**ALL NIGER DELTA PEOPLES' CONFERENCE**

**ORGANIZED BY**

**THE SOUTH-SOUTH PEOPLES. ASSEMBLY OF NORTH AMERICA  
(SSPA-NA)**

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## **NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA: DEFINING OUR FUTURE, OUR STRATEGY**

Your Excellencies  
Distinguished Guests  
Fellow Niger Deltans  
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is with profound pleasure that I welcome you, on behalf of the South-South Peoples' Assembly of North America (SSPA-NA), to the All Niger Delta Peoples' Conference, here in the beautiful city of Dallas, Texas, USA. To those of you who have traveled from Nigeria and Europe, I say a big welcome. To our non Nigerian guests, I say welcome to Nigeria and the Niger Delta.

The SSPA-NA is an association of Nigerians resident in North America whose ancestral homelands are in Nigeria's Niger Delta states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo and Rivers. These are the six oil producing states of Nigeria whose resources account for more than ninety percent of Nigeria's revenue. These states constitute the real Niger Delta region of Nigeria, thus we use Niger Delta and South-South interchangeably to refer to them.

The theme of this conference is Democracy, Federalism and the Niger Delta. We are privileged to have in our midst a group of experts, both Nigerian and non Nigerian, who have kindly accepted to speak to the theme of this conference. I will not steal the thunder from them. But with your permission, within the boundary of the subject of my address, I will touch on some of the elements that are contiguous to the theme of the conference.

It is instructive to note that, the ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta referred to in this address, were never colonized by the British. They were tricked into signing a series of treaties of protection with the British Crown in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the British sought to retain exclusive trading relationships with the peoples of this region at the height of European colonial scramble for Africa. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lady Lugard, the wife of Lord Frederick Lugard who later played a significant role in shaping the contours of the country, christened the territories NIGERIA. When Lord Lugard amalgamated the Colony of Lagos, the northern and southern protectorates into a country called NIGERIA in 1914; it was not with the consent of the peoples of the Niger Delta. It must be stressed, however, that none of the treaties of protection extinguished the sovereignty of the protectorates. Thus, they were expecting that an end of British "protection" would mean a return to their pre-protectorate independence status. However, they were surprised to discover that the British protectorate system had extinguished their independence and felt betrayed to find that their sovereignty had been transferred to the Nigerian State, the successor to Britain. With this illegal transfer of sovereignty, the peoples of the Niger Delta lost their jurisdiction over their territories,

their natural resources and critical elements of their political and economic administration. The current agitation for genuine federalism that will see the federating units of Nigerian federation exercise exclusive jurisdictions over their natural resources, etc., is a consequence of that loss of sovereignty.

The concept of extinguished sovereignty as used above is deliberately framed to provoke an in-depth analytical discussion of the rights of the Niger Delta peoples, as well as those of other Nigerian nationalities covered by British protectorate treaties. Under what circumstances can the sovereignty of a people be said to be extinguished? Have the people ceased to exist? Are they extinct? Did they voluntarily extinguish their sovereignty? These are some of the vital questions of Law which need to be explored.

By demanding the restoration of the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands and natural resources, the Kaiama Declaration was arguing for the non-extinguishable sovereignty of the peoples of the Niger Delta. Minority ethnic groups the world over, who are the indigenous or aboriginal people of their territories, face discrimination as they are marginalized and dispossessed of their lands and natural resources. In declaring 1993 the Year of Indigenous Peoples, the United Nations (UN) began to grapple with this problem at the global level. On June 26, 2006, the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution adopting the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples, recognizing their rights to their lands and resources. Does this Declaration apply to the peoples of Nigeria's Niger Delta? Many of us believe it does. The challenge therefore is for us to advance this argument in our articulation of the plight of the Niger Delta.

Generally, a discussion of democracy revolves around the issues of a free and fair election. While elections may be free and fair, a critical question remains the credibility of the elections. These three properties have proved elusive to the Nigeria State as elections could be free but not fair, and thus lack credibility and legitimacy. Some top Nigerian politicians, including Vice President Atiku Abubakar, have publicly stated that the elections that put them in office were not free, fair or credible. Simply put, they admitted that elected officials, including themselves, were rigged into office. It is questionable if officials elected on the platform of stuffed ballot boxes could provide the dividends of democracy to the population.

The denial of democratic dividends is most pronounced in the Niger Delta, where state governors and chairmen of local government councils have plundered the treasuries to enrich themselves and their cronies, while the population is left to squalor in abject poverty, neglect and want. While we strongly condemn the federal government for its gross neglect of the Niger Delta, it would be irresponsible of us to condone the policies of the Niger Delta state governors and chairmen of local government councils that have equally marginalized and impoverished the population. Thus, the Niger Delta state governors and chairmen of local government councils lack the moral authority to criticise the federal government when their policies have equal if not more debilitating effect on the population. In recent separate studies<sup>1</sup> by two reputable international organizations,

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<sup>1</sup> See, Niger Delta Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme, UN House, Abuja, Nigeria, 2006; International Crisis Group, Nigeria: Want in the Midst of Plenty, Africa Report No.

the failure of governance and the absence of government were underlined as the major cause of the problems in the Niger Delta region. All three levels of government share in this blame.

The peoples of the Niger Delta are victims of a three-pronged assault on their socio-economic and political rights by the local, state, and federal governments. That these three levels of government are controlled by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) is perhaps a testimony to the democratic ideals and governance philosophy espoused by the party leadership. Given the huge environmental degradation caused by the exploration and exploitation of oil and gas by the multinational oil corporations in the region, there is a strong perception in the minds of the population of an unholy alliance between these multinational oil corporations and the three levels of government that are supposed to exercise fiduciary responsibilities in the Niger Delta.

### **Our Future**

Let me preface my comments on the future of the Niger Delta on the imperatives of selfless service and leadership. The future direction of the Niger Delta depends on the peoples of the Niger Delta. We will succeed in building a sustainable environment and a democratic system only if we are united and remain united. The moment personal interest and ethnic irredentism are allowed to supersede the collective good, we will fail. We cannot engage in inter-ethnic wars as we strive to mould a united front in our struggle for renewed federalism and prosperity in the Niger Delta. Thus, the success of the SSPA-NA, for example, will be determined by the selfless services of its members. If the quest for personal gain is the motivation of anyone in being a member of the SSPA-NA, then the aspirations of the peoples of the Niger Delta will be severely compromised. Leadership anchored on selfless service to the community must be the mantra of the SSPA-NA, and indeed of all Niger Delta organizations.

The current structure of the Nigerian polity is what most of us refer to as “militaristic federalism,” whereby the central government controls the so-called federating units, creates local government councils, and determines the salary of public servants (governors, etc) of the states and local government councils. This is not a federal system, but a unitary political system. As argued elsewhere: “By electing a former military dictator, General Obasanjo in 1999, as its President in the post military era, Nigeria further solidified the military command system of government inimical to good governance and federalism.”<sup>2</sup>

The future we want and the future we are entitled to in Nigeria, is a restructured Nigerian polity that recognizes the tenets of federalism. A federalism where the federating units exercise exclusive jurisdictions over key elements of their polities, including natural resources, oil and gas, mining, forestry, agriculture, culture, education, etc. This renewed federalism will accord each ethnic nationality, with defined kingship system, language,

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113, 19 July 2006, and *The Swamps of Insurgency: Nigeria's Delta Unrest*, Africa Report No. 115, 3 August 2006, Brussels, Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> O. Igho Natufe, “Towards the Demilitarization of Nigerian Politics: A Prerequisite for Good Governance,” [http://thenigerdeltan.sspa-na.org/deltan/default2.asp?active\\_page\\_id=490](http://thenigerdeltan.sspa-na.org/deltan/default2.asp?active_page_id=490)

culture, and territory, an autonomous jurisdiction in its area. Thus, an ethnic group with multiple kingship systems will have to fuse into one to constitute an autonomous region within a given state (federating unit) of the new federal system. A state and an autonomous region will exercise concurrent jurisdiction with state paramountcy over agriculture, natural resources, oil and gas, mining, forestry, agriculture, education, while the latter will have exclusive jurisdiction over culture and language. Such an arrangement will protect the sovereignty of the ethnic nationalities, especially the minority nationalities, and enhance the machinery of government in the polity.

Our future also depends on the youths of the Niger Delta, who must be incorporated into the strategic frame of the region. Irrespective of our contending views on the tactics employed by various youth organizations in confronting the federal government and the multinational oil corporations in the Niger Delta over the past years, it is however universally acknowledged that these youths have placed the plight of the Niger Delta on the agenda of global political discourse. Therefore, our deliberations and proposals for resolving the crisis in the Niger Delta must take into consideration the issues raised by these youth organizations.

### **Our Strategy**

How do we convince the Nigerian population to accept the constructs of a renewed federalism as articulated above? It needs to be emphasized that each ethnic nationality and each state in Nigeria will benefit from the properties of a renewed federalism. Nigerians of non-oil producing states must be persuaded to see beyond the barrel of a crude oil which seems to becloud a general appreciation of the benefits of renewed federalism. Under the tenets of renewed federalism, federating units will exercise exclusive jurisdictions over natural resources, oil and gas, mining, forestry, agriculture, etc., key elements for the development of each state. Through this process, a vibrant internal trade system would be developed, one that will see State A selling crude or refined oil products to State B, while State B sells its mining products to State A, and State C will sell its agricultural products to State D, etc.

There is a need for us to construct strategic alliances with other states of the federation. These alliances will be informed by the *particular* and *general* interests of all parties, and packaged in a way that underline the jurisdiction of each and the collective security of all. This formula explains the success of federalism in the United States of America, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, and Australia.

Irrespective of their political affiliations, Niger Deltans vying for elective offices must accept to incorporate the construct of renewed federalism as critical elements in their policy platforms. Similarly, efforts must be made to ensure that all presidential candidates and their respective political parties subscribe to the concept of renewed federalism as articulated by the Niger Delta.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The intrusion of the military in governance since January 15, 1966 has severely eroded federalism in Nigeria. Unfortunately, successive civilian regimes of the Second Republic (1979-1983) and the Fourth Republic (1999 – present) have been unable to extricate the country from the overcoat of the military command system, primarily because the people have been excluded from the constitution making process. It is therefore imperative that a constituent assembly be elected to craft a new constitution reflective of the tenets of federalism. Representatives for the constituent assembly should be drawn from each ethnic nationality in the country.

The current federal system is not a viable option for the survival of Nigeria. Across the country are pockets of resistance to the flawed federal system. To dismiss them as fads of the moment would be disastrous to the polity.

I invite you to deliberate on these crucial issues at this conference.

Once again, I welcome you to the conference and wish you a fruitful deliberation, and safe journey to your respective homes at the end of the conference.

God bless Nigeria.

God bless the Niger Delta.