

SEA PIRACY IN COASTAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS OF AKWA IBOM STATE

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ABSTRACT: *Recently, the coastal Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State are witnessing an upsurge in sea piracy. These local government areas are, Eastern Obolo, Ibeno and Mbo. Because these local government areas are located between the Imo and the Cross River estuaries, which border on the Atlantic Ocean, this area of study is politically administered by the government of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The emergence of sea pirates in these local government areas did not only affect the economic activities of the people but also crippled their social life. As a result, this paper assesses the causes of piracy; which are illegal arms importation, unemployment and poverty. Other factors include by-catch, sponsorship and greed. It also discusses the adverse effects on the coastal people of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria as a whole. The negative effects of sea piracy include; loss of lives, damage of fishing gears, rape, hijack of both local and foreign vessels. As panacea, the government needs to reorganize the security structure and advance in intelligence gathering to track down the activities of sea pirates and illegal arms smugglers as well as create employment to reduce the numbers of restive youths.*

KEYWORDS: sea piracy, coastal areas, by-catch, waterways hijack.

INTRODUCTION

Akwa Ibom State, one of the littoral states in Nigeria was created on September 23, 1987, and has thirty one (31) local government areas; she shares the coastline with Ondo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Cross River States. Geographically, the state is bounded in the North by Abia State and in the South by the Atlantic Ocean. In the West, it is made up of the stretch of creeks and swamps from Opobo Town in Rivers State through the Cross River estuary in the East. (Akwa Ibom State Dairy, 2012). Out of the thirty one (31) local government areas in the state, only three namely Eastern Obolo, Ibeno and Mbo border on the Atlantic Ocean.

These local government areas are traversed and criss-crossed by large number of rivers and creeks, stretching from Imo River on the west to the Cross River estuary on the East. Water and land provide the artery for economic development and transportation. Traditionally, the occupations of the people of these coastal local government areas are fishing, trading, farming and hunting. Also, these local government areas harbor large quantity crude oil and natural gas.

Furthermore, most if not all of the villages that make up these coastal/riparian local government areas are underdeveloped due to absence or lack of basic social amenities, such as good drinking water, health facilities, good roads, landing jetties, educational facilities and banks. As a result, there is high level of unemployment, (particularly among the youth), poverty, youth restiveness and high crime level in the areas especially sea piracy. Thus, this paper emphasis on the causes of sea piracy its adverse effects and way forward.

ORIGIN OF SEA PIRACY IN AKWA IBOM ENVIRONMENT

There is no record(s) of when sea piracy started in the Akwa Ibom environment, but as one of the littoral states in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, sharing the same coastal line with Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers State, sea piracy may have been in operation for a long time now though their activities were not pronounced. The Greek word “peiran” means to attack or a person/persons who attack, robs and carry out illegal violence at seas, rivers or creeks. (The World Book Encyclopedia, 1986:448). This defines piracy. Based on the definition of sea pirates above, the activities of head hunters or ritualists on the waterways constitute piracy. According to local sources especially among the Obolo (Andoni) people of Eastern Obolo Local Government Area in Akwa Ibom State, there were no sea pirates, but activities of head hunters/ritualists who were not frequent but usually occurred when a prominent coastal chief (precisely a village head or local warlords) dies. Head hunters known in Obolo dialect as “inuink” meaning secret hunters were usually sent to hunt for human head(s) for burial rites. The head hunters usually disguised themselves as local fishermen, attacked and killed their victim(s) and in some cases made away with some valuable items such as money and articles of trade (in case of traders). Then, their activities were restricted to the creeks/rivers. Among the Oro of Mbo Local Government Area and people of Ibenu in Ibenu Local Government Area, all in Akwa Ibom State they are called Amauke mbon, while the Obolo (Andoni) people called Ebi Ino.

The local sources also has it that the activities of these head hunters and ritualists were prominent between 1940s and late 1960s, but gradually reduced after the Nigerian civil war probably because of the present of security operatives – Marine Police and The Nigeria Navy. For instance, between 1960 and 1970s, there were regular patrol of the coastal areas by both the Marine Police and the Nigerian Navy. The Marine Police at Opobo Town (Rivers State) and Ikot Abasi (Akwa Ibom State) covered Imo River and most of the creeks/rivers in Eastern Obolo; while the Navy and Marine Police from Calabar (Cross River State) and Oron (Akwa Ibom State) covered from Cross River to Kwa River.

In addition, the culture of using human heads for burial rites has been replaced with the use of native cows as a result of the impact of Christianity. Hence, the activities of head hunters are no longer practiced by the coastal people in the state.

The recent increase in sea piracy in the coastal/riparian communities in the Akwa Ibom environment may be linked to the emergence of various militant groups in the Niger Delta

Region (Akwa Ibom State inclusive). Between 1990s and 2000, Alamieyesiegha, (2005:97) described the militant groups in the Niger Delta region as armed gangs that operate especially along the waterways where they extort money and other valuables from oil workers and contractors. In addition the armed groups engaged in illegal bunkering and hostage-taking of oil workers in return for ransom demands.

Akpefan, and Sholarin, (2008:562-663) say that the militant groups' activities in the Niger Delta started with kidnappings and abductions of expatriate oil workers, theft of barges full of crude oil, seizure of assets, blockage of access and disruption of drilling activities. Alamieyesiegha (2005:23-25) claims that in July 1999, no fewer than sixteen Shell P.B workers were taken hostage by armed militants. In August 1999, five Britons were hijacked on board ship Askalad. In 2001, forty five Shell company workers were taken hostage, while in 2002 about twenty four were taken hostage from the same company.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to state here that militant groups are also found in Akwa Ibom State. Like their counterparts in Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers State, they make more money in hostage taking and illegal bunkering of crude oil through which they acquire various arms/ammunitions for their operations. No wonder in 2008, the state benefitted immensely from the Amnesty Programme of the Federal Government. It would be recalled that during the Amnesty Programme, not all the arms/ammunitions were turned in by the militant groups operating in the Niger Delta (Akwa Ibom State inclusive). Also some of the militants in Akwa Ibom State like other States in the Niger Delta did not surrender and were not captured in the Amnesty Programmes.

These groups that went into hiding in the creeks/rivers probably thought the Federal Government would not be sincere with the Amnesty Programme. Thus, when they emerged from their hide-out and turn to sea pirates, they started attacking people on the waterways and now extending their activities to the Atlantic Ocean thereby becoming a threat to the coastal people of Akwa Ibom State.

Causes of Sea Piracy in the Akwa Ibom Environment

A cursory look at some daily, newspapers weekly magazines and the electronic media in the state reveal reports of various crimes such as armed robbery, cultism, child trafficking, kidnapping and of recent sea piracy. The activities of sea pirates on these waterways are worrisome, and have crippled economic and social activities of the coastal people. The causes of sea piracy are many and these include; illegal importation of arms, unemployment, poverty; by-catch effects, contagious effect, and collapse of social structures. Other factors include activities of smugglers, sponsorship, greed and peer group influence.

Illegal Arms Importation

One of the causes of sea piracy in the coastal communities of Akwa Ibom State is the illegal arms importation. Sea pirates operate with small arms: Akpan (2011:18) referred to small arms as those weapons that are designed for personal use and they include AK47, grenades, self

loading pistols, revolvers, sub-machine guns and light machine guns. Since these small arms are not available in the open markets, the question now is how do the pirates obtain guns for their operations?

There are speculations on how pirates obtain their arms and ammunitions for operations. Okonta and Douglas (2001:80) traced availability of arms in the Niger Delta region, Akwa Ibom State inclusive to multinational oil companies. As they put it, Shell B.P and other multinational oil companies maintain private forces (like the Shell Police and Elf Police). These companies import arms and ammunitions, and have three armories in Bonny, Port Harcourt and Warri. Therefore, in the process of importing, arms may be sold to private individuals.

Okoba and Imbua (2008:656) linked the circulation of small arms in the Niger Delta region (including Akwa Ibom State) to the politicians who purchase small arms for purpose of using them to rig elections especially between 2003 and 2006. They engage the unemployed, unengaged and restive youths with arms to ensure that they (politicians) win elections. Thus, the large amount of weapons in the region has a lot to do with the huge amount of money stolen by politicians from public coffers. This may be true considering the fact that these small arms are very expensive.

Akporaro (2008:291-292) citing Human Rights Watch (2005) says smugglers from Gabon and Cameroon used high speed boats to transport arms and ammunitions from ships originating from Eastern Europe and Asia to West African Coast. Akpararo also says that the South-East of Nigeria like Aba and Awka are home to the manufacture of arms and sometimes state security personnel double up as arms dealers.

Considering the large arms surrendered and displayed during the Nigeria Delta Amnesty in 2008 and 2016 it point to the fact that these arms were probably acquired by politicians and given to the unengaged and unemployed youths for purposes of winning elections and some of the arms and ammunitions not retrieved after the elections are what these pirates are now using for their operations.

Also, during the Amnesty Programme of 2008, it is most likely that some members of the various militant groups in Akwa Ibom State like their counterparts in other states of the Niger Delta did not turn in their arms and ammunition probably, because they thought that the Amnesty of the Federal Government of Nigeria may not work. Hence, these pirates now used these arms and ammunitions to rob in the creeks/rivers and the Atlantic Ocean; thereby terrorizing the coastal /riparian communities in Akwa Ibom State.

Unemployment

Labour is one of the most important primary factors of production and Akwa Ibom State is endowed with enormous human and material resources. The state is also endowed with many untapped natural materials and agricultural resources.

Omoboriowo (1982:103) defines unemployment as underutilization of the factors of production. Oti ((2013:103) puts it this way “unemployment is a situation where those who are capable and willing to work cannot find jobs; while an unemployed person is therefore one who is available for work and actively looking for work but without any work”.

The unemployment rate in Akwa Ibom State is very high just like other States in Nigeria. For instance, Akwa Ibom State, economic, empowerment and development strategy puts unemployment estimate at about 7% between 1994 and 1996. The same document put youth’s unemployment rate at about 60% within the same period (AK – SEEDS 2004:5-6). The number is on the increase as is evidence from the data provided by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS: 2010) which ranked Bayelsa State as the highest in unemployment followed by Kaduna and Akwa Ibom State.

Indeed, unemployment is visible in the State while the coastal local government areas seem to be the worst affected inspite of their contributions to the wealth of the state as oil bearing communities. Unemployment gives rise to aggression, unrest and crime. Omoboriowo (1982:23) says all human beings who are unemployed looked on themselves as sub-humans that is not justifying their existence on earth. As Tom (2014:85) observes, “unemployment is a dangerous condition that reduces the self-worth of an individual and demoralizes his sense of values overtime, if there is no respite, it makes a man anxious and can take a toll not only on his health but also his world view.” Therefore, the upsurge in sea piracy in Akwa Ibom State is consequence of unemployment as the saying goes the idle mind is the devil workshop.

Poverty

Poverty is closely linked with unemployment. It is one of the most widespread socio-economic problems in the State especially in the coastal communities. It is pertinent to note that poverty is a general phenomenon in Nigeria. Several scholars have made attempts to define poverty. Townsend (1979:81) defines poverty as lack of the resources necessary to permit participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved in the context of insufficient supply of those things which are requisite for an individual to maintain himself and those dependent upon him. Udeh (2008:1044) defines poverty as a condition of want of the necessities of life or of scarcity or lack.

As of 1990, Akwa Ibom State was statistically rated as the 7th poorest state in Nigeria; poverty affected 6% of the population. A recent poverty data desegregation shows poverty varying from as low as 27% in few local government areas to about 90% in several others. Poverty is therefore, widespread and deep-rooted (endemic) because of lack of opportunities for sustainable livelihood (AK-SEEDS 2004:5). Moreso, a survey conducted in Akwa Ibom State in 2000 shows that the average income per capital (person) was ten dollars (\$10). This implies that an average citizen survives on N50 per day, an incredibly low amount for any decent persons’ survival (AK-SEEDS 2004:5).

Low per capital income reflects deep poverty facing most citizens of the state especially the coastal communities. The poverty situation seems to defy all economic measures. In point of fact, poverty breeds crime and corruption, all of which are inimical to the State. As Awake magazine (June 22, 2005:4) puts it, poverty is a valid motive for stealing (crime). Therefore, to meet up with the basic needs of life, young people are pushed to join sea piracy as a result of poverty.

By-Catch Effect

Following the industrial fishing by both foreign and Nigerian trawlers on Nigerian waters, there have emerged a new development in fishing among the coastal communities in Akwa Ibom State. Between 1970s and 1980s, there had been an increase in fishing trawlers in Nigerian territorial waters, which led to what Ukpatu (2012:1) describes as “by-catch.” According to Ukpatu, by-catch is the catch that are unused or not needed by these trawler operators. The author further states that by-catch may be regarded as anything the fishermen do not intend to catch and may include sea turtles, fish, crabs, shrimps, sharks, weeds and seabed debris. The unutilized subset of by-catch or the portion of the catch that is thrown over into the sea is known as “discards.”

According to local fishermen, in the 1970s, these by-catch and discards were given to them (fishermen) free by the trawler crews, but with time, the crew on request demanded for hot drinks, food items and cigarette in exchange. From 1980s till date, it was no longer barter business but cash and carry business. The trawler crews, selected by-catch and discarded, fishes, got them frozen on-board vessels and sold them to the coastal fishermen. Among the Obolo (Andoni) people in Akwa Ibom State and Rivers State, it is called in Obolo dialect “kponkpoben” meaning “just carry” “don’t select” while in Ibeno and Ibaka (Mbo) it is known as “trawler.”

In addition, Sigmund (2015) in an oral interview says, to embark on “kponkpoben or trawler” that is going to buy the by-catch, you need between five hundred thousand and one million naira, excluding the boat, outboard engines and other accessories. It is instructive to note that the transaction is done with physical cash and the number of coastal fishermen involved are many because of the result of increase in vessels and also the huge profit involved. Pirates made both the trawler crews and the fishermen their target. They (pirate) attack and rob both trawler crews and the local fishermen, collect their money, other belongings and in some cases outboard engines, fuel and food stuff from the latter.

Contagious Effect

Just like kidnapping and suicide bombing that were common in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan, India to mention but a few that gradually spread to Nigeria, so also is sea piracy. Technology has revolutionalized communication during the past decades and the manner people access information – practically anywhere in the world has become quicker, cheaper and easier. (Awake May 22, 2002:5). There are so many people online as a result of internet services and many people have been able to learn about many other people’s lives, products

and ideas (Awake May 22, 2002:5). Also mobile phones, the internet, mass and social media has extended pirate activities globally including Akwa Ibom State. Those involved in sea piracy in the coastal areas of the state may have probably studied the tactics and operations of sea pirate especially in Somalia. The internet, mobile phones and other social media have proved useful to connect people from many different locations.

Moreso, information on sea activities in Somalia and the Horn of Africa may be transmitted through social media and films to other parts of the world (Akwa Ibom State inclusive). Again, the activities of pirates in Rivers State, Bayelsa, Delta and Cross River States may have had huge influence on Akwa Ibom coastal communities since the state share the same coastline, linked with various creeks and rivers. However, piracy in Akwa Ibom State may not have international link but borne out of unemployment, poverty and the quest to get rich.

The availability of telecommunication masts in the coastal communities in the State may have enhanced communication among pirates. Also, the use of telescope by sea pirates, and other navigational instruments have made it difficult for operatives to arrest them (sea pirates) as they could easily sight security operatives and escape arrest.

Collapse of Social Structure

The social structure in this context refers to the family. It is a truism that families are the bedrock of society; and when families fall apart, society falls into social and cultural decline. (The Redeemed Christian Church of God: Sunday School Teacher's Manual, August 2017:132-138). Of recent, there are several reports in both the print and electronic media about an increased rate of divorce globally, (Nigeria inclusive). The same could be said of Akwa Ibom State and the coastal communities in particular. Divorced or a broken home is simply a family in which the parents are separated or a family that is set apart due to tension and certain problems. Divorce represents a tragedy that has undermined the home (family), the very basis of society. Parental divorce often affects the children's sense of emotional well beings (Awake, April 6 2005:6). Broken homes or divorce could lead to homeless children, delinquent youth and crime.

Abedoye (2017) says good fathers are known to provide leadership, protection, discipline, spiritual guidance and emotional stability for members of their families. Therefore, homes (families) without a father (not because of death) but as a result of divorce tends to become dysfunctional families. Because under normal circumstances, the balance of a family is usually maintained by its organization around a father-figure.

In addition, a situation where both parents are working class as civil/public servants or engage in business, can promote the development of unattached and uncontrollable children in some families as children are usually left alone or in the care of housemaids. For instance, the men in the coastal areas are engaged in fishing while the women indulge in petty trade /crafts. In such families or homes, there is little or no intimate relationship between children and their

parents. Within the coastal communities in Akwa Ibom State like other parts of the state, there are many children with single parent either as a result of death or separation (divorce).

Also the practice of polygamy is on the increase within the coastal areas of the State, thereby giving rise to many children without adequate care. This creates social misfits who now indulge in crimes including sea piracy.

Smuggling

The Gulf of Guinea include Akwa Ibom Coastal areas. Yisha and Olaniyi (2011:2-3) say the coastal states of Rivers, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Ondo, Delta and Bayelsa are noted for illegal bunkering of petroleum products which are shipped into large ocean faring marine vessels, waiting patiently on stand-by, either mid-stream or offshore. The areas also witness illegal refineries which refined various petroleum products and are smuggled out of the country to neighbouring countries like Benin Republic, Cameroun and elsewhere. This trigger pirate activities in the entire littoral states of Nigeria including Akwa Ibom State. The Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ibok Ete Ibaas says the Nigerian Navy has identified about six thousand (6000) creeks/rivers in the Niger Delta, out of which about thirty seven (37) is used as transit by smugglers (Atlantic FM Uyo, 6.00pm News, October 10, 2017). Pirates target smugglers of illegal petroleum products to get both foreign and local currencies. They also attack and rob illegal arm smugglers to get sophisticated arms and ammunitions for their operations.

Sponsorship

Another factor responsible for sea piracy in the state is sponsorship. Like other crimes such as drug paddling, child trafficking, kidnapping, armed robbery, one may not rule out the role of some rich and wealthy citizens either from Akwa Ibom State or other States as sponsors of the crime. Yishau and Olaniyi (2011:3) attributed the success of illegal crude oil bunkering and illegal refineries in the Niger Delta region to the involvement of influential persons and members of communities in which they operate. The communities usually shield the perpetrators for pecuniary benefits. Illegal crude oil bunkering or smugglers and sea pirates have sponsors. For instance, Momah (2013:96-97) stated the costs of purchasing various arms to include: AK47 cost N100,000; Rocket Propelled Grenade (RPG) N800,000 to N1,000,000; Pump Action Rifle - N250,000; Beretta and other Foreign Pistols – N50,000 while locally made pistols cost N25,000 and can only be afforded by the rich.

In addition, pirates, use speed boats and outboard engines which cost between N2.5million and N3million respectively, beside other accessories. The process of acquiring these sophisticated weapons confirmed sponsorship. The sponsors provide these young people in the coastal areas of the state with these sophisticated weapons and encourage them; promising them (pirates) shield and backing, thereby increasing the activities of sea piracy in the coastal/riparian communities in the state.

Greed

It is no news that one of the greatest problems of man is greed. The quest to get quick money and be recognized in the society has driven many people into crime. Some people involve in crime with the aim of becoming rich and those already rich wish to become richer. The society focuses on self rich syndrome and instant gratification (Awake: February 2005:5). For example George Iyamu a Deputy Superintendent of Police aided Lawrence Anini to become a notorious arm robber who terrorized the former Bendel State now Edo and Delta States. Through the confession of Lawrence Anini, it was discovered that the said deputy police superintendent benefitted in all the bank robbery carried out by Anini as certain percentage were given to him. This is a clear case of greed or the quest for money.

Peer Group Influence

Peer group has been identified as one of the agents of socialization. As Adeboye (2017) puts it you are influenced by the environment you live in and the people you are intimate with. The peer groups provide the individual with the opportunity to have contact with people outside the family where the individual learn things from one another. Peer group members do things to note that young people face daily pressures from peers. Through peer pressure, young people are usually exposed to the influence of television, movies, the music industry and the internet. It is also true that young people usually prefer to be with their friends – peers, learn behaviour that helps them socializes themselves. The involvement of young people in sea piracy in coastal communities in the state may be attributed to peer influence. Some may have been persuaded or influenced by friends (peer) to join sea piracy, while some may have volunteered or see it as an adventure.

EFFECTS OF SEA PIRACY ON THE PEOPLE

Sea piracy are a considerable nuisance and present a very real threat to the state especially the coastal people as well as the country. Fishing in the night and day has been affected, as the people find it difficult to navigate pirate-infested creeks, rivers and the sea (Atlantic Ocean). It has led to dwindling fish production, hunger and starvation. The activities (pirates) have caused a lot of damages to fishing gears; boat mishap and loss of lives; especially when they are chased by the security men (Nigerian Navy).

Also, many local fishermen have lost their outboard engines and petrol tanks to sea pirates. For example, whenever the pirates meet with the local fishermen especially those involved in by-catch trade, they would collect their money and where money is not available will forfeit their outboard engines, petrol tanks and fuel. In addition, women and other traders using the creeks/rivers to market at Ibeno, Ikot Abasi and Eastern Obolo are usually attacked, raped and killed while their money and food stuff are sized. Again, Emeroke, a town in Eastern Obolo Local Government Area was attacked by sea pirates in October 2015, six people were killed while many sustained injury. In August 2016, twenty fishermen from Ibeno were reportedly kidnapped by sea pirates who demanded ransom (Planet FM Uyo, New at 6.00pm Sunday 21/8/2016). The story is the same at Okoroete, the Eastern Obolo headquarters; Ibaka (Mbo

Local Government) and Utaewa (in Ikot Abasi Local Government) all in Akwa Ibom State. In all the coastal communities mentioned above, lives were lost both civilians and security men (police); while police stations at Okoroete were destroyed with arms and amunitions looted. Psychologically, the coastal people are living in fear and terror. It is difficult to distinguish between kidnappers, militants and sea pirates because of the mode of their operations. Hence, there are no stable non-indigenes (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa and Ghanaian) in these coastal communities because of the activities of sea pirates. These people have started leaving the affected areas for fear of attacks or being killed by pirates.

Furthermore, multinational oil companies operating within the shore of the state are not spared by sea pirates. There are cases of some oil platforms being attacked, oil workers kidnapped or killed, while security operatives guarding the platforms are also victims. The desire of the state (Akwa Ibom) government to build the deep sea port may be impeded. They are threat to both foreign and local vessels as they prey on the ships and may hijack and demand ransom.

Finally, sea pirate activities would discourage foreign investors coming to Akwa Ibom State in particular and Nigeria in general. It would portray Nigeria in bad light outside the country. The country as well as the state would lose some revenues as a result of pirate activities. Since unemployment, illegal importation of arms and poverty among others breed crimes, it is pertinent to adopt the following measures to stem the increased pirate activities on these waterways.

The government should as a matter of urgency address the issues of unemployment, poverty, illegal importation of arms, social inequality and absence of social infrastructure and services not only in the coastal communities but also in the entire state. There should be genuine and observable improvement in governance.

CONCLUSION

“Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil” (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Sea piracy is a crime and those caught should be given speedy trial and adequate punishment accordingly. Some causes of piracy highlighted and their effects discussed; it is left for the government to take decisive measures to curb this crime. It is imperative to state that if sea piracy is not checked, politicians may hijack and use them during elections come 2023. What is happening in the North East of Nigeria may occur here in Akwa Ibom State. The government should not treat sea piracy with a kid’s glove or else it will be like militancy, kidnapping and child trafficking. As the saying goes “A stitch in time saves nine”.

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