

JONATHAN, OKOTIE AND THE NIGER DELTA

By Tayo Jebutu

Africa is a land of gold, and like the Biblical Havila, its gold, oil or solid mineral, as the case may be, is good. It is a land of sunshine and good vegetable; rich soil, with an unbelievable assortment of mineral deposits buried in its vast desert, forest and water. It has the population, (450m approx) and potential market that could sustain vibrant economics activities; even the Pacific Rim nations and the west cannot boast of this Eldorado.

Unfortunately, on the debit side, too, Africa is bedeviled by bad leadership, which has long crippled its development and economic transformation; to the extent that a recent survey indicated that the continent is behind the rest of the world by 250 years. And that is stating the obvious if we want to be very objective.

When viewed from a regional context, the Nigerian situation is no less pitiable, taking the Niger Delta as a case in point. The 2011 general elections offers yet another opportunity for political parties to present new options for lasting solutions, in view of the resurgence of militant activities in the region.

According to Rev. Chris Okotie, Presidential candidate of FRESH Democratic Party, an indigene of the Niger Delta, “A combination of neglect, corruption and greed by successive leaders (military and civilian) helped fuelled the present crisis to the boiling point.” Okotie recalled that former President, Gen Ibrahim Babangida expressed fears in a recent interview that should the Niger Delta problem continue to attract undue publicity in the western media, what looks like a local problem in a quiet corner of Nigeria, might be blown out of proportion, and thus encourage the militants to become more violent, to the hurt of the country.

Babangida’s fears are not unfounded. Insurgent forces always relish global media attention. It confers on them, the legitimacy and sympathy that are so crucial to their cause. In the case of the Niger Delta, while the legitimacy of their agitation cannot be contested, their method; which has recently degenerated into banditry, pre-emptive attacks on innocent citizens, cultic wars by rival armed gangs, kidnapping of children, armed robberies etc. is gradually eroding the credibility of their campaign. And that is unfortunate.

According to Rev Okotie, who is making his third bid for the Presidency, while the Amnesty Programme of the PDP – led Federal government is coming too late in

the day, he doubts the sincerity of the government in keeping with the terms of the peace pact.

In fact, the recent resurgence of militant activities in the region, point to government's incompetence in the handling of the problem. But Okotie, who doesn't want to be drawn into the controversy, rejects the view that President Goodluck Jonathan's re-election would signal the beginning of lasting peace in the troubled region, arguing that Jonathan, though an indigene of the zone, does not represent his own people as such, because he's running to further the interest of the PDP not the interest of the south – south zone.

He went on: “The PDP government response has been to keep talking loud and doing little. Perhaps, a combination of dialogue with the more mature leaders of the troubled region, and then deploying reasonable force to check the bandits and other criminal gangs looks like a healthy imperative at this stage of the crisis; apart from getting serious about the amnesty programme.”

Unable to come up with any new ideas, the Yar'Adua/Jonathan government has simply toed the line of previous regimes in the quest to finding “lasting solution” to the crisis in this oil rich region. President Jonathan's own moves in this area as in all other policy matters have been unsteady; sometimes coming off as uncertain.

Also in a sense, the complicated case of the Niger Delta is an evil legacy of past leaders which we have to contend with before it becomes a full blown armed struggle; the consequences of which would be too horrible to contemplate. As if to underscore Jonathan's flippant attitude, he hastily absolved **MEND** of the October 1, 2010 bombings, even when his security team was still investigating the incident. All facts, are however pointing to **MEND** as the culprit.

Kidnappings, target bombings of sensitive oil installations, cult wars and general banditry have become more frequent than ever before despite the Amnesty deal. This worrisome trend is further aggravated by large scale fraud perpetrated by indigent officials of agencies set up to manage relief measures in the area.

Almost by the day, the issues are getting more complicated, as new dimensions are emerging; the situation is becoming more desperate. Exasperated and apparently confused, the Federal Government, in the absence of a well thought out. Cohesive programme of action, seems tempted to resort again to the use of force to suppress the growing power of the militant's campaign, which seems to be rearing its ugly head again.

It is absolutely certain that a military solution would not avail in an election year like this. And Okotie said that much: “This government is bereft of new ideas to check the problems of basic, general insecurity in the nation, not to talk of the more complex Niger Delta situation, What we need now is force of ideas, not military.”

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