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Niger Delta Project for Environment,
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Forging a common link with the rural Niger Delta Communities through participatory education, campaigns and enlightenment of the people on the problems confronting them, equipping them with the basic knowledge of their situation, and encouraging them to non-violently address the issues themselves

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RIVERS STATE

(Niger Delta, Nigeria)

A HARVEST OF GUNS

A Brief Report By:

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Small Arms Project

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Harvest of Guns In Rivers State

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1. Preamble

For sometime now, Rivers State situated in the southern part of Nigeria had witnessed an unprecedented violence and bloodletting unleashed by groups suspected to be cultists, gangsters and bandits. This state of abnormality had reportedly disturbed the executive Governor of Rivers State, Dr. Peter Odili who recently signed into law The Secret Cult and Similar Activities (Prohibition) Bill passed by the Rivers State House of Assembly.

According to the new anti-cult law, groups such the Vikings, the Buccaneers (Sea Lords), The Amazons, National Association of Seadogs, Black Axe, Neo-Black Movement, Klu Klu Klan (KKK) Confraternity, Eiye or Air Lords Fraternity, National Association of Adventurers, Icelanders (German 2000) and numerous others were banned ¹.

2. Mopping The Small Arms

In what can be vividly described as a dramatic turn of event in Rivers State, the groups were said to have surrendered their deadly weapons to the Government of Rivers State in the wake of the new law and renewed government's anti-small arms proliferation campaigns against the groups.

On Monday, June 28, 2004, the Government made a public display of 3 automatic and 1 locally made pistols, 4 assorted riffles including pump action guns, and a large number of bullets ².

On Wednesday, July 14, 2004, a local group surrendered another cache of weapons allegedly to have been responsible for the violence and blood letting in the State. The weapons recovered include 122 Russian made AK 47 riffles and 8 sub machine guns. Among the weapons were 2 Nigerian Army weapons with number **NA83/37739** and **NA83/21** ³.

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1. Over 130 groups considered to be campus cults and non-campus groups alike believed to be responsible for the violence, which had left in its trail blood, and sorrow were outlawed by the new law.
 2. Reported in *The Tide*, Tuesday June 29, 2004. The Rivers State Government owns the newspaper.
 3. Hon. Magnus Abe, the Information Commissioner presented the weapons before journalists and NGO workers in Government House in Port Harcourt said to have been recovered from a dissident faction of one of the armed groups in the State, but refused to state the source. The weapons were very obsolete. Those present expressed doubts about the veracity of the claim because the weapons presented cannot wreck the havoc that had been witnessed in the State. The event was celebrated as one of the wonderful achievements of the government's anti-cult campaigns in the State.

On Wednesday, July 14, 2004 at a colourful ceremony in Okirika⁴, which was well attended by government officials, traditional rulers from the area, community people in their presence, Tom Ateke was said to have handed over 30 AK 47 riffles, 5 dynamites and charms and amulets to the traditional ruler of the town, who handed over same to the Government in the State through the Okrika Local Government Chairman; while receiving the weapons, the Okirika was quoted as saying: "we should express our gratitude to the group led by Ateke for surrendering arms and ammunition in their possession"⁵.

On Friday, July 16, 2004, at Abuloma, another Okirika community in a similar manner to that of Tom Ateke, some youths of the community said to have been involved in violent activities in the country, reportedly handed over 19 sophisticated weapons, including Assault riffles and ammunitions.

On July 23, 2004, a news release signed by the Chief Press Secretary to the Governor of Rivers State, Emma Okah (Esq.) claimed that 137 more riffles were surrendered in Rivers State, bringing the total so far surrendered to about 307. Out of the additional 137 riffles, 130 were AK 47 while 8 were pump-action guns. 30 out of the 130 AK 47 were said to be surrendered by some youths in Asari-Toru Local Government Area, another community in the State that had suffered tremendous violence and destructions of lives and properties linked to the activities of the cult groups. 100 of the AK 47 came from Kula, a rural village in the Degema Local Government Area, while 7 pump action guns were received from youths from Abua/Odual Local Government, another hot bed of violent activities in the State (*see The Tide, July 19, Monday, 2004*).

3. Who Cultivated The Blossoming Trees of Gun?

The volume of deadly weapons being reportedly recovered in the State at a period when there is no civil war, is no doubt, frightening and incredible.

4. Okirika community located in the Okirika Local Government Area of Rivers State had witnessed unprecedented violence and destructions, which is believed to be politically motivated. Members of rival political parties apart from the ruling Peoples Democratic Party were exiled from the island. Ateke who is a leader of one of the banned groups (Icelanders – German 2000) lived there and is accused of being responsible for the deaths and destructions in the area. He is believed to have been used as a political thug during the last elections, and enjoys the support of those in power in the State.

5. *The Beacon*, July 23 – 29, 2004, weekly local newspaper reported it.

Although, the government is jubilantly making a public show of the success of their much-touted anti-cult war, it also casts doubt on the credibility of government and its responsibilities to the citizenry.

However, beyond the "relief" which the on going arms mop-up may have intended to bring to the traumatized people in the state, the pertinent question is, how did all these dangerous "small" arms get into the system? Who is responsible for the purchase of these sophisticated and expensive weapons? To begin with, the weapons are very expensive and those who wield them are dangerous and known to be unemployed youths without a visible means of livelihood. The question is, where do they get money from to acquire assault riffles, AK 47, detractors, dynamites and fuses? And who trained them to understand the intricacies and complexities of using these weapons of "mass destruction"?

The guns are not being purchased from open markets. Even though one has money you can't find them easily. The market for sophisticated weapons is a seriously protected and highly restricted territory. Who is beating the drums for the naked masquerades? Indeed, these weapons are no luggage for kids?

4. Who Brought The Guns?

In an open letter to Rivers people which was widely publicized in the papers in Rivers State, Alhaji Asari Dokubo ⁶, unanimously linked the Executive Governor of Rivers State, Governor Odili, Dr. Abiye Sekibo, current Federal Transport Minister, Chief Austin Aparu, Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and some of Odili's aides as sponsors and financiers of the terror gangs (cult groups) unleashing mayhem and violence in the State and its people.

6. Dokubo, the former president of the Ijaw Youths Council (IYC), was a very good and close friend of Odili. The strain in their relationship started after the April 2003 election. "Alhaji" as he is called, had issued paid Advertorials in local newspapers on the 2003 entitled 'Carry Go' Elections, The Ijaws were Denied of Their Rights of choice Between Candidates" he condemned the results. Odili had reportedly asked him to retrieve the Advertorials and when he refused this, thus the frosty relationship. Alhaji led **Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF)**, a armed militia group for a while. The group is said to be fighting for the liberation of the Niger Delta peoples especially the Ijaws of the zone. Recently, he announced his renunciation of armed struggle and had remained vocal on issues of marginalization and local politics. Since he had been declared wanted by the Nigerian Security agencies had remained underground to evade arrest.

According to Dokubo, the armed groups were formed and empowered before the general April 2003 election, to ensure the victory of the PDP in the state "by any means necessary".

However, Odili, Sekibo and other government officials accused of being sponsors and financiers of cultists in the State had personally, and through their different aides, dismissed Dokubo's claim as "baseless and untrue"⁷.

5. Is This Time To Celebrate?

Ordinarily, the surrendering of hundreds of deadly weapons by the armed persons and group calls for celebration and merry making.

But to the poor women, children and men who bear the negative consequences of the havoc and violence, the question is, have they really surrendered the guns? Is the end to this sanguinary irrationality in sight? Is this time to celebrate any victory in the Mop the Small Arms Campaigns? Or, is this a mere smokescreen to bamboozle the people?

On Thursday, July 22, 2004, at Diobu, a bustling suburb in Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital, as usual, at about 9.00 am of that fateful day, a group of armed youths wielding sophisticated riffles shot sporadically in the area, possibly on a reprisal mission against a rival group leaving in its trail 4 innocent passerby dead.

On Thursday, July 26, 2004, a group until the time of this report, its identity not known, stormed another suburb popularly called Okirika Waterside in Port Harcourt, they came in a boat and unleashed terror on the residents of the area. 6 people were gunned dead, another person, a woman who received gunshots later died in a hospital⁸.

7. Several local newspapers in the State, the *Argus*, *Telegraph* etc published their refutals.

8. Interviews with local residents and local Police authority confirmed the incident and established that the dead were mere victims.

On July 31, 2004, a black coloured Mercedes Benz 190 reportedly pulled up close and those inside it opened gunfire at two young men who were walking along the Nkpogu Road (very close to the A. C. Michelliti Headquarters) in Port Harcourt. Two died instantly from gun wounds while one died few hours later in hospital. The car zoomed off after accomplishing their mission. Those killed may have been members of rival cult groups but this has not been independently confirmed.

On Wednesday, August 4, 2004, at a popular area in Port Harcourt, Mbonu Street, between 8.00 - 9.30 p.m. (in the night), a group of youths arrived the place and rained bullets from their automatic riffles for hours. Frightened residents of the area remained indoors while the madness lasted. Unconfirmed reports said that a boy of about 5 years was killed by stray-bullet⁹.

6. What Is To Be Done?

It is obvious that there is an urgent need to mop up the arms in the hands of unauthorized persons in the State. The amount of arms so far allegedly recovered is evidently a far cry compared to the volume apparently in circulation. The government seemingly lacks both the political will and sincerity to mop up the arms for obvious reasons¹⁰. Those fingered as sponsors of the terror gangs should be stripped of all immunities and investigated properly, and if found culpable, be brought to book accordingly. Security agencies in the State should be probed to determine their roles in the arms proliferation. Mostly, the State Police Command should also be investigated. The command should be overhauled. Also, pressures should be sustained by non-governmental organisation (NGOs) and others working in the areas of Small Arms Control and Prevention to re-double their effort to halt the looming darkness threatening the land. The Federal Government of Nigeria should also genuinely and urgently intervene to restore normalcy in the State.

9. Police declined comment on the sporadic gunshots, but confirmed what happened to NDPEHRD's researchers.

10. In the course, of this research, many who spoke to the team expressed doubts about Government sincerity in disarming the gangs, and expressed fears about being used for future political activities by the government of the day.

7. Conclusion

The activities of the terror groups in the State have no doubt reached a frightening level. One is afraid of the coming gloomy season of unguarded violence and bestiality demonstrated by the groups. Armed violence and robbery has been on the rise in the community. There is the need to stop the small arms and all hands must be on deck. The government should stop the raid on rural communities in the State to look for small arms. The soldiers, Navy, Police and Air Force carrying out the raids, kill innocent children and women in the rural communities ¹¹.

8. Acknowledgement

This report is based on a research carried out in Rivers State, Nigeria between May - early August 2004 by Patrick Naagbanton ¹², Mr. Stevyn Obodoekwe ¹³, and Ms. Constance Meju ¹⁴. We want to use this medium to thank victims and witnesses of the recklessness of the terror groups in the State. They spoke to our team in confidence and pleaded for anonymity for fear of reprisals. We are also grateful to the various government officials and security operatives who confided in us. We also thank the various journalists and editors who allowed us into their morgue to do the research. We also thank the various gang leaders who during the research "warned" us not mention their names, but gave their own version of their "struggle".

Finally, we thank IANSA for deepening NDPEHRD's interest in the campaign to stop Arms proliferation ¹⁵.

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11. In our coming report, NDPEHRD shall publish a comprehensive list and pictures of victims of those who had been killed and the attendant destructions. The grim lack of humanity with which these groups discharge terror call for concern from all.
 12. Naagbanton is the co-ordinator of the Niger Delta Project for Environment, Human Rights and Development (NDPEHRD).
 13. Obodoekwe heads the Human Rights Programme of NDPEHRD. The Small Arms Project is under the programme.
 14. Meju, is NDPEHRD's Board member.
 15. NDPEHRD is a member of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) based in United Kingdom (UK). The coalition is a global movement against gun-violence, a network of more than 500 civil society organisations working in 100 countries to stop the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons. IANSA seeks to reduce the impact of small arms by fostering collaborative advocacy, promoting the development of regional and thematic networks, supporting capacity building and awareness raising.