



# COAV

Children in Organised Armed Violence

## An Empirical Survey of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence in Nigeria: Egbesu Boys, OPC and Bakassi Boys as a Case Study

This report is part of an international research project on children and youth in organised armed violence (COAV) coordinated by Viva Rio, ISER (Instituto de Estudos da Religião) and IANSA (International Action Network on Small Arms). The study presents contextual comparisons of organised armed groups, and the involvement of children and youth within them, in ten countries across four continents. The history, structure and functioning of the groups themselves are discussed, as are the motivations, desires and day-to-day realities of their child and youth members, as well as the common threads in public policy used to deal with the problem. In so doing, the study is a starting point for the much needed discussion of a situation that is too often addressed by state force and repression.

**Mohammed Ibrahim,  
Centre for Democracy  
and Development**

# An Empirical Survey of Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence in Nigeria: Egbesu Boys, OPC and Bakassi Boys as a Case Study



Mohammed Ibrahim, Centre for Democracy and Development

*This chapter focuses on armed vigilante groups, such as the Bakassi Boys, and ethnic-militias, such as the Egbesu Boys and the O’odua Peoples Congress (OPC). The report is divided into three parts. Part One gives a contextualised summary of these groups. Part Two takes a closer look at the human face of this phenomenon, with profiles of individuals involved. Part Three examines possible solutions to the problem, with an evaluation of relevant social programmes and policies.*

## Introduction

Since the implementation of democratic rule in May 1999, the phenomenon of organised, armed violence has become a defining characteristic of the socio-political scene in Nigeria. Different armed groups, known as vigilantes and militias, have evolved from nearly every geographical, ethnic and social section of the country. As vehicles for expressing desertion from the state in a demonstration of local autonomy, these groups have been especially prevalent post 1998. Since independence, ethnic, religious, and politically motivated violence has claimed over 10,000 lives in Nigeria, most of them civilians (Global IDP, 2002).

For a society that suffered a severe deterioration in its economy and politics as the result of thirty years of military rule, the assumption that democracy would herald a dawn of peace and development was understandable. However, the present democratic era in Nigeria has seen incessant violent conflict with a growing presence of children and young people taking up small arms and light weapons to join vigilante groups and ethnic/religious militias.

The prolonged militarisation of Nigerian society by successive military regimes has resulted in the emergence of such armed groups as the Bakassi Boys in the East, O’odua Peoples Congress (OPC) in the Southwest, Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) in the North and the Egbesu Boys of Africa in the Niger Delta. Between 1993-1998, General Sani Abacha (military ruler) heightened ethnic and regional tension in a bid to perpetuate himself in office, pitting state forces against opposition groups, and in the process igniting disputes that led to the formation of several self-help security groups such as O’odua Peoples Congress OPC (Agbaje, 2002).

The disenchantment and frustration of young people, much due to mass poverty and unemployment, has further increased the number of aggrieved youth and resulted in the emergence of area boys<sup>1</sup> and Almajiris<sup>2</sup> who target the very society that has alienated them. The Nigerian state has consequently not been able “to build an appreciable degree of confidence among Nigerians, ensure discipline within the ranks of elite, manage the economy in the interest of the people or construct the much needed platforms of inclusion, tolerance and participation.” (Ihonvbere, 2000)

<sup>1</sup> The activities of street urchins known as “area boys” have continued to cause consternation among residents in Lagos. These boys tend to behave in an aggressive manner, and appear to be under the influence of drugs. Area boys are located at almost every bus stop in the city, where they collect informal tolls from either commercial bus drivers or conductors in full public view and seemingly without fear of punishment.

<sup>2</sup> The word “almajiri” is from the Arabic word “almuhajirin.” The concept stems from the prophet Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina, and means the emigrant. In Northern Nigeria, the term almajiri could mean any person irrespective of gender who begs for assistance on the street or from house to house as a result of some deformity or disability. The term also applies to children between the ages of 7 and 15 who attended informal religious schools and roam the streets looking for assistance.



Due to these and other problems, there has been an unprecedented rise in the number of adolescents and young people recruited into vigilante groups and militia. Although observers and commentators have given various reasons for the increased participation of young people in non-state and state organised armed violence in Nigeria, until now there has been no qualitative or quantitative research that focuses on this problem within the country.

Although the Nigerian state regards children and youth as “the leaders of tomorrow” and key catalysts for social change, economic and political development, and technological innovation (Nigeria National Youth Development Policy, 2001), the turbulent political environment in Nigeria seriously limits the possibility of such a tomorrow. The involvement of young people in organised, armed violence is one of the most visible forms of conflict in Nigerian society today.

Newspapers and broadcast media report daily on violence by militias, vigilante groups, armed robbery gangs, in schools or by young people on the streets. Since 1999, when Nigeria returned to civil rule, there have been problems of violence resulting in over 10,000 deaths and the internal displacement of over 300,000 people. The majority of victims were children and youth.<sup>3</sup> The Centre for Democracy and Development, has compiled the following list of over 30 incidents of violent disturbances that occurred throughout the country from May 15, 1999 to August 24, 2003. Witnesses to these disturbances have claimed that in most cases there were a high number of young people involved as both perpetrators and victims.

	Dates	Place	Nature of Crisis	Fatalities
1	May 15, 1999	Niger Delta (South)	Struggle for local government headquarters	200
2	July 18, 1999	Shagamu (Southwest)	Clashes between Hausa and Yoruba over traditional rites	40
3	July 22, 1999	Kano (Northwest)	Clashes between Hausa and Yoruba in retaliation over Shagamu conflict	70
4	August 5, 1999	Niger Delta (South)	Clashes between Ijaws and Iboje over oil rich land	N/A
5	August 11, 1999	Taraba (Northeast)	Conflict between Ketuba and Chambas	200
6	September 9, 1999	Lagos (Southwest)	Yoruba separatist and the OPC	16
7	October 4, 1999	Niger Delta (South)	Fight over land in Port Harcourt between Oronka and Elmas	30
8	November 21, 1999	Niger Delta (South)	Egbesu Boys and policemen	72
9	November 25, 1999	Lagos (Southwest)	Riot between Yoruba and Hausa over control of Mile 12 Market in Lagos	100
10	February 21, 2000	Kaduna (Northwest)	Fight between Muslims and Christians	100
11	May 20, 2000	Kaduna (Northwest)	Fight between Muslims and Christians	150
12	May 27, 2000	Niger Delta (South)	Crisis between Ukhobos and Itsekiri near the oil town of Warri	N/A
13	June 21, 2000	Kano (Northwest)	Proclamation of Sharia Laws	N/A
14	June 25, 2000	Nasarawa (Northcentral)	Conflict between Tiv and Hausa speaking ethnic groups	N/A
15	October 15, 2000	Lagos (South)	Four day conflict between OPC and Hausa Fulani	100
16	October 18, 2000	Lagos (South)	Three day conflict between OPC and Hausa Fulani	100
17	November 26, 2000	Kano (Northwest)	Implementation of Sharia Law	N/A
18	September 7, 2001	Jos (Northcentral)	Conflict between Muslims and Christians	165
19	October 12 and 23, 2001	Benue State (Northcentral)	Communal fights between the Tiv and military intervention	219
20	October 14, 2001	Kano (Northwest)	Protest by Muslim youth against Anglo American air strikes on Afghanistan	-

Incidents of violent conflict in Nigeria  
 Source: National newspapers

<sup>3</sup> See Global IDP Project newsletter of January 2002.

Child and youth involvement in armed violence deeply harms not only the intended victims, but also their families, friends and communities. The effects of such violence are seen not only in death, illness and disability, but also in terms of the quality of life of those living in affected areas. The involvement of young people in armed violence greatly increases the cost of health and welfare services, reduces productivity, decreases the value of property and, disrupts a range of essential public services.

It is in light of the above that the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) has conducted a research study on children and youth in organised armed violence in Nigeria. The study develops a closer understanding of the phenomenon and enhances new policy responses in the sub-region. This study also intends to develop and inform CDD's own work and capacity. Understanding the factors that increase the risks of young people becoming the victims or perpetrators of violence is essential for developing effective policies and programmes to prevent violence.

## **Methodology**

Essentially, this study adopted two research methods: a literary review and field research. The literary review included reading through an array of documentary sources of published and unpublished materials relevant to the study. Sources included book publications and articles in journals, newspapers, magazines, as well as conferences and seminar papers. Content analysis of relevant data obtained was carried out regarding the subject of study.

The field research involved informal surveys based on unstructured interviews of a limited non-random sample of respondents and discussions with actors considered relevant to a full understanding of the situation being investigated. These included members of the O'odua People's Congress (OPC) in Lagos, Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta, Bakassi Boys in eastern Nigeria, the Police Department Forensic Science Laboratory, officials of relevant institutions/organisation such as Ministries of Health, Youth, Sports and Culture, non-governmental organisations, religious organisation and resident communities.

Secondary quantitative data regarding accident and firearm mortality rates of the selected study area were obtained from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) and the Police Department Forensic Science Laboratory.

The Nigerian National Youth Development Policy defines youth as all young persons of ages 18 to 35 years. However, for the purpose of this study, the focus will remain on adolescents and youth under eighteen years-old that are involved in armed groups, and those youth over the age of eighteen that became involved whilst still minors. For the purpose of this study, the definition of armed violence will specifically involve the use of small arms and light weapons.

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, several problems were encountered in the field during the course of the study.

In the few months that preceded the study, the operations of the Bakassi Boys had attracted considerable controversy in the Southeast. Due to the sudden withdrawal of all security from government house by the Inspector General of the Nigerian Police in response to a court injunction from a High Court in the state of Enugu, the Bakassi Boys effectively became the private army of Governor Dr. Chris Ngige. Consequently, many of those who were approached to comment on the Bakassi Boys declined to do so as they felt distrustful as to the nature of the interviews and what the information solicited would be used for.

In the Niger Delta, the subject of the study provoked painful memories amongst interviewees of destruction and death at the hands of state security agents in the region. Furthermore, as many of the problems that have led to the rise of youth militancy within the region (as discussed above) continue until today, many community members supported the Egbesu Boys struggle against these perceived injustices, and any reference to the subject often provoked suspicion and anger. Accordingly, researchers had to tread carefully in order not to offend armed group members and members of the local community. This situation was aggravated at the time that fieldwork was carried out due to bloody clashes between several ethnic groups in the Niger Delta.

Clashes also took place during this period between the Egbesu Boys and a combined force of the Nigerian Army and Navy, resulting in the deaths of several youth and members of the armed forces. Respondents and key informants were also suspicious of outsiders due to the fact that security agents had earlier visited the area in an attempt to arrest members of the Egbesu Boys. Furthermore, in addition to informants being cautious in their responses to interviewers, members of armed groups strictly warned researchers against taking any photographs.

Respondents of the survey questionnaire and participants in the focus group discussions originally sought financial gratification before they would participate in these activities. Almost all interviewees assumed that the research was being lavishly funded by either the state or oil companies, and therefore wanted their own share of the "cake." However, when the nature of the study was explained, informants agreed to participate without charge.

Interviews with youth members of the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) were not carried out due to difficulties encountered in finding a researcher that had a sufficient knowledge of the Hausa language and the safe access to this informant group.

## **I. CONTEXUALISED SUMMARY OF COAV**

### **Area of Study Profile**

Nigeria lies on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea and is bordered by the Republic of Benin on the west, Niger to the north, Chad to the north-east and Cameroon to the east. Nigeria occupies a vast land area of 923,768 square kilometres with climatic conditions alternating between dry and rainy seasons.<sup>4</sup>

The 1991 Population Census put Nigeria's population at 88.9 million. At a growth rate of 2.8% per annum, this was projected to be around 115 million in the year 2000. With more than 235 ethnic groups, Nigeria's population is predominantly young. Six out of every ten Nigerians are under 25 years of age and the total population of those between the ages of 15 and 34 was about 30 million in 1991. That is equivalent to one in every three Nigerians. Of these, 14 million (47%) were males while 16 million (53%) were females. It was estimated that in 2000 the total population of this category of young persons was about 38 million, with the male/female ratio almost one to one.<sup>5</sup>

Currently the Federal Government of Nigeria recognises six geopolitical zones, each comprising five to seven states. Nigeria has a total of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory (FCT-Abuja), and 774 local government areas. Nigeria has experienced falling living standards since 1980. The country had a per capita income growth rate of over 4% in the 1970s but has experienced negative growth for most of the 1980s and early 1990s, with a per capita income growth rate of -2% in 1998 (World Bank, 2001).

---

<sup>4</sup> Federal Republic of Nigeria Annual Abstract of Statistics 2001. Federal Office of Statistics. Abuja, Nigeria

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

This fall in living standards is best reflected in the rapid rise in the poverty rate, from 12% in 1980 to 66% in 1996. This calculation is based on a relative poverty line of two thirds of the average per capita expenditure (Olaniyan, 2000).

The Gross National Product (GNP) is \$310 with the annual growth rate declining from 4.2% in the 1960s through the 1980s to the present rate of 0.2%. The inflation rate stands at 39%, with 70% of the population earning less than one dollar a day. Forty percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Sixty-seven percent of the population is rural and the rest reside in urban and semi-urban areas with a population density ranging from 180 persons per sq. km. for rural areas to 340 persons per sq. km. in urban areas (NPC, 1998). Within urban centres, between six and eight people may share a room.

According to the National Programme of Action (NPA) on Survival, Protection, and Development adopted by the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1992, the illiteracy rate is 69.5%. A closer examination of the data shows that the highest level of illiteracy is found amongst older women. Less than a quarter of women 45 years old and older are literate. The NPA data also shows that 67% of adults in urban areas are literate, compared to 42% in rural areas. The Southwest and Southeast have female literacy rates of 55% and 60% respectively, while the rates in the Northwest and Northeast range from 21% to 22%.

### **Brief Historical Analysis of the Situation**

After independence in 1960, Nigeria underwent thirty years of military rule (1966-1979 and 1983-1999). During these periods, political and social values were deeply undermined. Military regimes in Nigeria have typically started with a forceful seizure of political power, indefinite detention of politicians and activists, and harassment and summary execution of opponents. There was a deliberate and strategic weakening by the ruling powers of the political and socio-economic well being of Nigerians as a tool for domination and control, as well as the use of "fear" and "divide and rule" tactics to keep Nigerian citizens from organising. The ruling military protected criminals as long as they served the governments interest of retaining power, and created subservient cults of violence among businessmen, politicians, university administrators, traditional rulers, academics and young people (students, area boys, militia groups) in a further attempt to sustain their hegemony (Asobie, 1999).

Since democratic rule was established in 1999, the intense competition for political space has led to further violence, which threatens the survival of the democratic process. Studies have shown that due to political turmoil, there is a greater likelihood for an increase in conflicts in the immediate wake of political liberalisation (Smith, 2000). Indeed, Ndegwa argues that in some African countries, democratic openings have intensified competition among ethnic groups (Ndegwa, 1997).

Growing violence over the last 10 years confirms an almost total breakdown of public security in Nigeria. The country has seen increased inter/intra-ethnic conflicts, vigilante activities, militia and religious crises, extra-judicial killings by security agents, political assassinations, and the free flow of arms and a rise in armed banditry (CLO, 2001).

This rise in violent crime has left the population in a state of permanent insecurity. In 2001 and 2002, the federal government and the inspector general of the police announced a series of measures to reform and improve police conduct. Regrettably, some of these measures, such as Operation Fire-for-Fire, introduced in early 2002 in an attempt to deter criminals, have resulted in increased human rights violations by the police, particularly extra judicial executions, and will do little to restore public confidence in the institution. No fewer than 875 people reportedly lost their lives to extra-judicial and arbitrary killings by state security forces in Nigeria between 1999 and 2003.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See the *Punch* newspaper of July 28, 2003 on the investigation and report released by Access to Justice, an NGO based in Lagos.

As a result of the inability of law enforcement agencies to provide adequate protection, the general population has tended to resort to ethnic militia and other “self help” security forces to protect their property and their lives. Writing on the weakening of the state, Adekanye (1998) observed that:

*Communities, citizen groups and individuals are found everywhere organising their own self-defence forces or vigilantes or contracting some of these functions to privately paid security agencies or guards. In most cases, the state military, security and police agencies are unable to provide much needed security against night marauders, robbers and bandits.*

Once established, such groups tend to self-perpetuate as most of their members were previously unemployed and see the groups as a source of employment (Atoyebi, 2003). At the same time, adolescents and youth have been increasingly recruited as members.

Youth in traditional Nigerian society were accorded social status and political recognition. According to Adeleye (1971), the 18<sup>th</sup> century Islamic revolution in northern Nigeria was spearheaded by youth, and revolutionary leader Uthman Dan Fodio, who began to preach at the age of 20 or 21. Awe (1964) cited the role of youth under normal traditional government in Ibadan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as being that of warriors. Furthermore, Nigerian youth played a prominent role in the struggle for independence during the colonial period and were important in the fight for post-independence democracy.

However, since independence, youth in Nigeria have been increasingly marginalised from decision-making processes, including those involving benefits and social services (Enemu, 1998; Adeniyi, 1998; CDHR, 1998). The lengthy period of military rule in Nigeria has left young people ill prepared for societal responsibilities and leadership. According to Sule-Kano (2002), the Nigerian State violates the political, economic, social and cultural rights of youth. They are not given special attention by the state as to the kind of leadership role expected of them in the future; and they are not allowed to partake in decision making on how Nigerian society should develop.

Although young people have always been involved in violence, they are more directly involved in armed violence in Nigeria than ever before. Due to the frequent involvement of militias in inter/intra communal violence, and in conflict with state forces, adolescents and youth are used to varying degrees of violence. It has been claimed that armed youth known as *Almajiris* were used to unleash mayhem in Abuja and Kaduna in November 2002, while religious demonstrators protested during the Miss World pageant.<sup>7</sup> The violence that ensued left about 250 people dead and another 3,500 wounded (see Table 1).

Militia groups in the north have also used children and youth during violent episodes. The CDHR Annual Report (1997) on the human rights situation in Nigeria documents violence in the Niger Delta:

*Following the outbreak of hostilities, several villages were sacked while properties worth several millions of Naira were wantonly destroyed. The dexterity with which the war was prosecuted was to say the least amazing. Sophisticated weapons including grenades were freely employed. Mercenaries were recruited to train young people in the art of handling these weapons of modern warfare...months later when the war subsided, over one thousand people, including four policemen, were reportedly killed while about 3,000 others sustained injuries. Several other people simply disappeared without a trace.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Article published in *This Day*, November 29, 2002.

This report did not give the specific ages of young people recruited for weapons training. However, testimonies from youth and adolescents in the Niger Delta interviewed for this study revealed that adolescents under 16 years of age are involved in acts of group violence and are considered to have skills that make them a valuable and lethal asset. Said one Egbesu Boy:

*These children are very quick, and when there is a crisis they bring with them to the confrontation new assets...they have the willingness, and ability, to kill or kidnap oil company expatriates and Nigerian military personnel and they have successfully closed down and destroyed many oil sector infrastructures in Warri and other places in the Niger Delta.*

Adolescents and young people are increasingly involved in vigilantism, and may participate due to the absence of employment alternatives and to gain respect from society. In the eastern part of Nigeria, adolescents and children are frequently associated with the vigilante group Bakassi Boys:

*In Aba, every little kid wants to be called a Bakassi Boy because every adult knows that the revolt that cleansed Aba of [crime] then known as MAFIA, was started by traders from the Bakassi market. Little wonder then that vigilante services are popularly known and called Bakassi.*

*According to one Bakassi Boy leader interviewed, young people are trained in crime control and are paid more than the Nigerian police for their services. A high number of adolescents involved with area boy activities in Lagos have created an easy avenue for recruitment from this group into militia groups such as the OPC. Researchers for this study witnessed under 18 year-olds working as Gani Adam's (OPC militant faction leader) bodyguards during a field visit to the OPC office in Lagos. The majority of these minors were from the Eso group of the OPC, a militant wing of the Gani Adams faction (see section Command structure below).*

## Actors Involved

Nigeria has three major ethnic groups: Hausa-Fulani in the North, Igbo in the Southeast and Yoruba in the Southwest. Armed groups, vigilantes and militias involving young people from different ethnic groups have emerged over the past few years.<sup>8</sup> There are four prominent organised, armed groups operating as ethnic militias and vigilantes in Nigeria. These are the O'odua Peoples' Congress (OPC) in the Southwest; Arewa People's Congress (APC) in the North; Bakassi Boys in the Southeast; and Egbesu Boys of Africa in the Niger Delta.

*Arguably, the most militarily accompanied of these ethnic armies is the Egbesu Boys, which has taken on the might of the Nigerian military machine and is not in a hurry to capitulate. The group with the most potential for destabilisation is the factionalised OPC, which not only questions the viability of the Nigerian state, but has in fact taken over some functions of the state in its area of operation. The most ominous of the groups is the APC, which represents an inevitable counter-thesis to what is perceived as the excesses of the OPC (Adebayo, 2000)*

This section briefly profiles each of the above listed groups. Where relevant, this includes briefly outlining their history, estimated number of members, command structure, relations with the communities in which they operate, examples of the types of conflicts that they have been involved in and, wherever possible, how the groups fund their activities.

---

<sup>8</sup> These include several other groups representing the interests of Northerners; the interest of the Igbo ethnic group in the Southeast; the Ijaw in the South and many others.

## O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC)

The O'odua People's Congress (OPC) was established in August 1994 with the primary aim of defending, protecting and promoting Yoruba interests.<sup>9</sup> It is an ethnic, nationalist organisation active in the south west of Nigeria and within the historical homeland of the Yoruba. Under successive military governments in the 1990s, freedom of expression and association were severely restricted (CDHR, 1998). The struggle against military repression and frustration at political and economic marginalisation acted as strong motivating factors to galvanise the disenfranchised population, particularly young people, in support of the OPC (Olaniyan, 2002).

As the OPC evolved, a split emerged between two opposing factions: the moderates loyal to Dr. Frederick Fasehun, and a more radical wing led by the younger Gani Adams. This militant wing was less willing to compromise, objected to the OPC playing any part in Nigeria's programme of political transition, and consisted mainly of young supporters.

The OPC is a complex organisation that has taken on several different roles as it has adapted to the changing political and security environment in Nigeria. Its activities have ranged from political agitation for Yoruba autonomy and the promotion of Yoruba culture to violent confrontation with members of other ethnic groups, and, more recently, vigilantism and crime fighting. It is these two main areas of activity—ethnic militancy and vigilantism—that most involve children and youth.

### **Command structure**

According to OPC leaders interviewed and individuals close to them, the organisation has a strict hierarchical structure, chain of command, and efficient system of communication. It has structures and executive committees at national and state levels, with the annual National Conference as its supreme decision-making body, and the National Executive Council as its governing body. At the local level every member is required to belong to a branch, which are grouped into zones that are in turn grouped into sub-regions. There are different wings, including a women's wing, and sections responsible for different activities. The militant youth wing of the Gani Adams faction is known as "Eso."<sup>10</sup> As one Eso member explained: "Eso are the groups involved in vigilante activities and ensuring discipline, for example during meetings or public events, and have been involved in violent clashes with other ethnic militia."

The OPC claims to have more than five million members, spread over the whole of Nigeria. The greatest concentration of members is in the states commonly referred to as Yoruba land. It also claims to have members in several West African countries. Many of the OPC leaders are professionals with a high level of education and political awareness, and their membership covers a broad range of ages and includes both sexes.

---

<sup>9</sup> "Aims and objectives of the OPC" is a document of the O'odua People's Congress.

<sup>10</sup> "Eso" in the Yoruba language refers to a people's army or soldiers used for protecting local communities and traditional rulers from external attack during the pre-colonial tribal wars in Yoruba land. They were also used during this period as a vigilante force and acted as police during peace time. The 'Eso' are believed to possess spiritual powers and knowledge of weaponry during war.

### ***Relations with the community***

The OPC have utilised the public's disillusionment with the police and concerns about persistent insecurity and rising crime as a way of solidifying their standing within the community. Proclaiming that they have magical powers and charms to overpower criminals and protect individuals, the OPC have built up a reputation as a force that is seen in the eyes of some as more effective than the police. Residents interviewed by researchers in Lagos state confirmed that the OPC's vigilante role was well established and that they maintain an active presence during the day and night, patrolling the streets in groups of up to thirty and openly carrying rifles, pistols, cutlasses and knives. Instant justice is often handed out to suspected criminals by members of the OPC via summary executions, including burning people alive while 'necklaced' with disused car tyres (CLO, 1999).

Interviewed local residents claimed that the OPC are invited by community members, particularly local land owners, to provide security arrangements at official gatherings and other high profile events. An OPC member told researchers that they are hired for parties and other social functions and are also employed as guards at private and government residences. The OPC appear to have drawn support from the less-educated sectors of the population and a local government official interviewed for this study confirmed that the local government maintains a close relation with OPC members and leaders. The interviewee told researchers that local government authorities in the state of Lagos employ OPC boys to help collect local levies in motor parks, bus stops, market places and shops.

Other ethnic groups such as the Hausa have been at the receiving end of serious ethnic violence on the part of the OPC. Few Yoruba residents interviewed contradicted or criticised the OPC, however members of the Hausa ethnic group resident in Lagos told researchers that OPC vigilantes have been imposed upon them: "We have felt especially uneasy, threatened and uncomfortable by the presence of OPC patrols. We believe that they are only looking after Yoruba interests and are hostile towards other tribes."

### ***Illegal and legal commerce activity***

Involvement in vigilante activities has been an easy way for the OPC to make money, as it is a common practice for local residents to make a financial contribution to the OPC's vigilante activities.<sup>11</sup> One interviewee told researchers that, "OPC boys between 16 and 20 years-old collect twenty or fifty naira (between 20 and 50 cents) from commercial bus drivers at every bus stop before allowing people to go."

A local government official interviewed for this study said that between 10% and 20% of local taxes and levies collected go to the council, with the rest going to the OPC. According to interviewed residents, each house has to pay around 500 naira (about four dollars) a month for security from OPC members.

### ***Armed confrontations***

The OPC has been involved in numerous acts of violence and its members have killed or injured hundreds of people.<sup>12</sup> While many of the most serious attacks have been directed against the Hausa, or people suspected to be of northern Nigerian origin, victims have also been from other ethnic groups. Human Rights Watch (2003) has documented cases where the OPC have attacked Yoruba civilians and policemen. It has been difficult to confirm the sources of weapons used by the OPC.

---

<sup>11</sup> See note 2. At bus stops in Lagos young men between the ages of 14 to 28 extort money from commuter drivers or conductors. Drivers interviewed attested that these groups are known as area boys and are working for the OPC.

<sup>12</sup> Integrated Regional Information Network newsletter of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 20 October 2000.

## **Child and youth involvement**

It was observed during fieldwork for this research that the section of the Eso under Gani Adams is mainly made of adolescents less than 17 years. Many Eso members are recruited from the numerous street children within the region. A sixteen-year-old Eso member commented during interview with researchers that joining Eso helped him to get off the street where he had lived previously. One interviewee said that if he had not joined the Eso, he may “have been among those [street children] caught and burnt alive as suspected armed robbers.”

When researchers asked if Eso members were trained, most said that they did not receive any special training, and that being a Yoruba was sufficient to qualify for membership. However, some claimed to have received training or education about the history and culture of the Yoruba, while others claimed to have been taught conflict resolution skills and how to relate to the police. Eso members told researchers that when individuals join the OPC they are asked to take an oath that includes a commitment to not engage in criminal activity. However, in December 2002, the police arrested scores of OPC members of the Gani Adams faction in Ondo state in Southwest Nigeria. Those arrested were mainly youth and adolescents between the ages of 16 and 24 years-old that faced charges including attempted murder, unlawful possession of weapons, and belonging to an illegal organisation.

Although it is difficult to estimate the exact number of adolescent and youth members of the Eso group, it was observed during fieldwork for this research that the majority of rank-and-file members were adolescents from rural backgrounds with little or no formal education.

## **Bakassi Boys**

The origin of the Bakassi Boys has been traced to the decision by traders in the market city of Aba, to repress armed robberies plaguing the area (Ukiwo, 2002). According to media reports, armed robbers killed about two hundred people in the city between 1997 and 1999. In addition, during this period one out of every 10 adult traders in Aba is believed to have owned a gun, either for self-defence or for criminal purposes.<sup>13</sup> High crime levels prompted the shoemakers' association in the Ariaria market to organise a self-defence vigilante group. The vigilante group was provided a headquarters, regular salaries and money to purchase arms by the traders (Williams, 2002).

### ***Command structure***

The Bakassi Boys have been described as a well structured organisation made up of a Chairman, Secretary, Deputy Chairman Operations, Director of Operations, Director of Administration, Director of Finance, Treasurer, Armoury, Public Relations Officer (PRO) and with membership drawn from the traders in the different markets. Recruitment of vigilantes is carried out by dividing commercial markets into zones, from which six vigilantes are selected (Williams, 2002).

*The newly recruited members undergo training on the rules of the organisation for two months before they are sent out on any operation. Initially, about 500 youth, young and middle-aged person abandoned their normal occupations as traders to become full-time members of the Bakassi Boys, and the group has since increased its numerical strength to about 3,500 across all eastern states of Nigeria.*

---

<sup>13</sup> *Tell* magazine, February 4, 2002.

According to Williams, the Bakassi Boys operate on the basis of information and investigation, which depends on an undisclosed 'secret system'. This has been very effective in combating crime and the Bakassi Boys have extended their operations to other cities in Southeast Nigeria that were also experiencing high levels of violent crime. This has included Umuahia, the capital of Abia State; Owerri, the capital of Imo State; and Onitsha, a large market town in Anambra State (Babawale, 2001). In August 2000, the Bakassi Boys was officially established in Onitsha by the Anambra state government under the name Anambra State Vigilante Services.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Relations with the community***

Local community attitudes towards the Bakassi Boys have been characterised by a combination of fear, despair and helplessness. According to one resident interviewed. "No one dare challenge Bakassi. No one talks about their activities in this town. In about March last year 2002, I saw two dead bodies on the road to Aba, their bodies were charred beyond recognition, with tyres that had been burnt around them and a lot of Bakassi Boys parading in the area."

### ***Illegal and legal commerce activity***

According to Williams (2002), the traders' associations initially financed the Bakassi Boys through monthly contributions. However, state Governor Orji Uzor Kalu subsequently took over the financial burden of the traders. In a media interview, the chairman of Abia Vigilante group Onwuchekwa Ulu stated that their funding came in part from the Abia state government and in part from donations and levies collected from the public.<sup>15</sup>

Both traders and local government officials interviewed claimed that they contribute significantly to the upkeep of the Bakassi Boys through a monthly levy. However, there is no reliable information as to how much the Bakassi Boys receive in terms of salary or direct payments. The chairman claimed to media reporters that his members were paid just "a token amount." The Bakassi Boys have enjoyed the support of local state governments in all three states where they currently operate (Abia, Anambra, and Imo) and have been provided with offices, uniforms, vehicles and salaries.<sup>16</sup> Although some leaders have tried to deny their links with the government, others have been more candid. For example, Abia Vigilante Services chairman Onwuchekwa Ulu spoke of the relationship with the state government: "We have a cordial relationship, just like a father and son business...we have a very good relationship with the governor...We always obey him because he who pays the piper dictates the tune. He pays us and we always try to obey him."<sup>17</sup>

### ***Armed confrontations***

The Bakassi Boys participate in an organised form of violence that is sanctioned or sponsored by state governments. After suffering years of violent crime, abuse by the security forces, and government inaction, local populations trusted the Bakassi Boys to assume the task of fighting crime. However, with the realisation that the Bakassi Boys' methods were sometimes arbitrary, and often brutal, relief quickly turned to fear. An interviewee who claimed to have been detained by the Bakassi Boys in Aba in August 2002 stated, "While I was detained they brought a youth out and killed him in front of me. He was between seventeen and twenty. They killed him with a machete and a big stick."

<sup>14</sup> Law no.9 – Anambra State Vigilante Services Law. *Anambra State Official Gazette*. August 4, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See "Nobody can bribe Bakassi boys" in *Post Express*, Sunday, September 29, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Orji Kalu, governor of Abia State, in *Insider Weekly*, July 16, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

The Bakassi Boys are not known to have had any violent clashes with other militias. They are a vigilante group whose members come from eastern Nigerian indigenous peoples (Umechukwu, 2002). Although it is impossible to estimate the number of people killed by the Bakassi Boys, documented sources have shown that they have been responsible for scores of summary executions, perhaps in the hundreds (CLO, 2001).

### ***Child and youth involvement***

According to testimonies given by local residents, youth and adolescents are seen patrolling the streets and the markets, and standing outside their offices openly armed, wearing black uniforms and caps, sometimes with red bandannas, and with their own official vehicles. Local residents interviewed for this study confirmed that there are active members of the Bakassi Boys under 18 years of age. Local community members told researchers that there may be as many as 200 children, adolescents and young people under the age of 20 in the Aba section of the Bakassi Boys.

Residents interviewed in Onitsha confirmed to researchers that the victims of Bakassi Boys have included several teenagers. According to the Eye Newsletter (2000) of the Onitsha Youth Development Organisation, at least nine people, including several teenagers, were killed by the Bakassi Boys in Onitsha on April 10, 2000. The victims ranged in age from 13 to 20 and it was reported that an unidentified 13 year-old girl was also killed. The Bakassi accused the victims of being armed robbers.

### **The Egbesu Boys of Africa**

The Ijaw ethnic nationality is the fourth largest ethnic group within Nigeria after the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. They are scattered across six states in the Niger Delta: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Ondo, and Rivers States (Nigeria, 2002). At the geographical and ecological level, the Niger Delta is one of the foremost water lands in the world, both in terms of area and bio-diversity (HRW, 1999; Ogunbunmi, 1999). In 1956, crude oil was discovered in Oloibiri (Ijawland). Eson (2000) has addressed the massive economic exploration in the region by multinational oil companies in collaboration with the military dictatorships.

Both oil exploration and upstream activities (such as dams, agriculture and other activities) in the Niger Delta have led to environmental degradation and the under development of local communities since the 1960s (Soremekun and Obadare, 1998; Iyayi, 2003). In the 1990s, communities within oil producing regions of the Niger Delta became increasingly divided between those members of the elite or of a particular ethnic group who are seen as having benefited from the oil, and the majority population (Akani, 2002).

Niger Delta communities are frequently engaged in inter/intra group conflict. Evidence of the death and destruction relating to these disputes is abundant (Saro-Wiwa, 1998; HRW, 1999; CLO, 2002; ERA, 2001; and CDHR, 2000). As a result of these violent confrontations, the Nigerian military occupied the region in 1998 (Okonta, 1999).

On December 11, 1998 over 5,000 Ijaw youth of the Niger Delta converged at a football field at the primary school in Kaiama village of Bayelsa state. They met to discuss how to tackle the problems created by oil and gas exploration and agreed on the Kaiama Declaration, calling for the withdrawal of all military forces from the Niger Delta area and a halt to oil producing activities in Ijaw communities.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> See Article 3 and 4 of the "Kaiama Declaration." The declaration stemmed from a youth conference held in the Niger Delta in 1998.

Their request made to the oil companies was not heeded and was followed by Operation Climate Change, which included popular mass actions to mobilise local communities and cease gas exploration in the region (Okonta, 2000). This included the occupation of oil company property, the kidnapping of company officials, and demands made for reparations to compensate for years of environmental damage. Such actions led to killings by both the security forces and the young people involved in the unrest.

Various communities and youth organisations resorted to organised armed self-and community-protection against state security forces as tensions in the area increased (Olorode, 2000). The violence in Kaiama saw the Ijaw organise into groups, including the Egbesu Boys of Africa, as well as the Chicoco Movement, the Ijaw Youth Council, the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw communities and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (Okonta, 2000).

Egbesu is a religious belief in some Ijaw communities and can be used as a tool to maintain discipline in times of crises.<sup>19</sup> According to Alagoa (1999) Egbesu adherents established the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) to reclaim the people's residual spiritual resources in the struggle for common survival.

### ***Command structure***

The Egbesu Boys are estimated to have around 5,000 Ijaw youth members, drawn from already existing groups in the region. These include: The Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND); The Movement for Reparations to Ogbia (MORETO); The Nembe 1895 Youth Movement; Opkolom Imo Engeni, and the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) (Okonta, 2000). These groups agreed to come together under the Ijaw Youth Council with the Egbesu Boys serving as the militant wing of the group (Osuoka, 2002). Although the groups' administrative power remains in the hands of the president, who holds regular parliaments in the clans, towns and villages of Ijawland, the Egbesu Boys' rebellion is a grassroots youth movement organised from the bottom up.

### ***Illegal and legal commerce activity***

Due to their use of sophisticated weaponry, speedboats and satellite telecommunication gadgets, it is believed that the militant groups in the Niger Delta are well financed. Highly influential members of the community have been linked to financially supporting these groups.<sup>20</sup> One member of the Egbesu Boys interviewed for this study claimed that they were given monetary and technical assistance from retired military personnel who believe in their struggle. Another interviewee said that they also finance their activities with money from crude oil theft and kidnapping.

### ***Armed confrontations***

In addition to armed confrontations with the state security forces and oil company personnel, the Egbesu Boys are also in regular dispute with other ethnic groups within the region. Human Rights Watch (1999) noted that inter ethnic conflicts involving youth from the Ijaw (or Izon), Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ilaje ethnic groups have resulted in several hundred deaths since 1997. Clashes involving young people in Warri, a major oil town in Delta state, left scores dead.<sup>21</sup> In May 1999 the Itsekiri Survival Movement claimed that a group of Egbesu boys believed to be from the Ijaw Armed Youth kidnapped 186 adults and children during a conflict with the Itsekiri Youth. The majority of these kidnap victims were murdered and 30 Itsekiri towns and villages were subsequently burnt.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> CDD interview with Salube, an Egbesu member in Port Harcourt, August 23, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> "Niger Delta: 10 Killed in Renewed Ethnic War," *This Day*, Monday July 28, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> See conflict table above.

<sup>22</sup> Article in *Nigerian Tribune*, January 9, 2003.

The present democratic government in Nigeria has continued to militarise the Niger Delta area by sending anti-riot police, soldiers and navy personnel to the area. In response to such state actions, armed youth kidnapped and eventually killed 12 police officers in Odi, Bayelsa state in November of 1999 (Okonta, 2000). The government responded to the killing by invading Odi with armed military personnel, which led to the killing of hundreds of people including women, children and security officers (Amnesty International, 2000).

Youth are demanding a share of the oil wealth in order to end fighting. Contrary to popular belief that democracy will help appease tensions, one interviewee claimed, "I do not really think that the slogan in the Delta is 'democracy'. I think the slogan in the Delta is 'self-determination,' 'self-rule,' 'control of our resources'."

CDD estimates that up to 80 people were killed in the Niger Delta region between July and August 2003 (see Table 1). The number of deaths may be higher since, according to Delta State Police Commissioner Charles Akaye, "Like combat fighters, the militant youth in the Niger Delta do not leave behind their dead and injured. Even when they engage with the police and suffer huge casualties, they carry away their dead and wounded colleagues as they retreat."<sup>22</sup>

Local community attitudes towards the Egbesu Boys have been characterised by fear and threat. As Iyayi (2000) points out, violent conflicts have been reported between the Egbesu Boys and different communities in the Niger Delta, the Urhobos and Itsekiri, the Isoko communities, Ogoni with Andonis and the Ilajes.

### ***Child and youth involvement***

The protracted violence and unrest in the Niger Delta has led to the increased involvement of adolescents and youth in groups involved in extortion, hijacking, sabotage and kidnapping for private gain (HRW, 1999). The alarming rate of unemployment amongst adolescents and youth in Nigeria has been cited as a reason for their becoming willing tools in the violent disputes within the Niger Delta region (IPCR, 2003).

Due to the recent instability of the region, children and adolescents in the Niger Delta are now aware of the benefits of extortion, crude oil theft and the kidnapping of oil expatriates for ransom (CDHR, 2000). According to an IPCR report (2003) on strategic conflict assessment in Nigeria, many of the young people who are fighting in the Niger Delta are "idlers" for whom violence has become a source of daily entertainment and personal gain. However, it must be noted that when offered little chance of a paying job, involvement in organised youth groups offers an accessible alternative to the lack of formal employment.

During fieldwork for this study, researchers observed that minors were being trained in the use of arms and driving speedboats. Such training has led to the involvement of younger and younger adolescents and youth in armed confrontations with rival groups and state forces. In January 1999, Wariebi Ajoko, a 14-year-old boy, was reported to be among the more than twenty youth shot dead by soldiers that were deployed to curb the rise in crude oil thefts and kidnapping in Bayelsa state.<sup>24</sup> One interviewee told researchers, "now the youth of the Niger Delta are fed up, and they have declared a people's war on the oil companies and government forces."

---

<sup>24</sup> Article in the *Sunday Guardian* newspaper, Lagos, December 6.

### ***Arewa Peoples Congress***

As noted above, since the transition to civilian rule in 1999 there has been an upsurge of communal antagonism and conflict, including numerous confrontations between ethnic, social and religious groups in Nigeria (Solomon, 2001). As with the emergence of other groups in Nigeria, in response to increasing insecurity, the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC) was formed as a militant wing of the Arewa Consultative Forum (a socio-political and ethno-religious group) to protect the interests of the Hausa-Fulani in the north. According to APC leader Captain Sagir Mohammed (retired), the organisation seeks to “safeguard and protect Northern interest, wherever it is, and to respond to further attacks on Northerners in any part of the country, particularly Lagos state where the OPC is unleashing terror on the Northerners.”<sup>25</sup>

### ***Command structure***

The APC has a militant wing reputedly led by Sagir Mohammed. Mohammed reports directly to the Ulama (scholars) or elders of the Arewa Consultative Forum that co-ordinate the political activities and day-to-day administration of the group. The exact number of APC members is not known. However, it is estimated that thousands of children comprise the Almajiri group and that they are mostly from poor peasant and low-income working class families (PADEP, 2002). Efforts by some political leaders of the Northern States to expand Islamic religious law have provoked intense and often-violent reactions in the northern part of Nigeria and the Almajiri have been used as an armed tool in such crises (Sam, 1997).

### ***Child and youth involvement***

As far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century there were formidable Islamic scholars and institutions in most commercial centres of northern Nigeria (Bello, 1994). The acute crisis that gripped the Nigerian economy from the 1970s onwards, and the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the mid 1980s, was responsible for a deep social crisis that included the collapse of such notable Islamic educational institutions. As a result, many Almajirai, the majority of who were children of the traditional Koranic institutions, became beggars, hawkers and wanderers, facilitating their recruitment into antisocial activities (Sule-Kano, 2002), including use by the APC for religious and political activism.

One major source for using children and youth in the violent confrontations are the *hisbah* vigilantes organised by the governments of Zamfara, Niger, Katsina, Sokoto, Kano and other Northern states who are political stakeholders in APC. The *hisbah* are armed with locally manufactured guns, bows and arrows, knives, and include children and adolescents drawn from the Almajirai, school dropouts, street boys and even from neighbouring countries (IPCR, 2003). These young people have been recruited as religious police and deployed throughout states within the region for the purposes of enforcing Sharia law.<sup>26</sup>

Independent preachers and mosques, widespread in the Northern States, have also used the APC to mobilise young children through appeals to social justice and religious purity. These movements have drawn upon a large pool of disaffected young people (overwhelmingly male) who have largely been forsaken in the economic malaise and social dislocation of recent decades (Momoh, 1999). Government officials regard armed youth with hostility, and efforts to curtail their activities have instigated clashes with security forces in various parts of the country.

---

<sup>25</sup> Article in the *Lagos News* January 10 2000.

<sup>26</sup> The State sponsored *hisbah* are mostly drawn from informal Koranic schools and members fall between the ages of 8 and 27 years-old. They report Sharia non-compliance to the state or local council authority and act as informants to the APC.

Most recently, an outbreak of religious rioting in Kaduna, claiming more than 200 lives, was instigated by Muslim indignation at Nigeria's plans to host the Miss World beauty pageant. Angered by a commentary on the Miss World pageant appearing in a major national newspaper, crowds of armed children burned the publication's Kaduna offices and then attacked Christian sites and political targets in central sections of the city.

### ***Illegal and legal commerce activity***

Conflict assessments in northern Nigeria have indicated that ex-servicemen are increasingly playing an important political and financial role in armed violence at the local level (IPCR, 2003). The Institute for Peace and Conflict Research also emphasises that children between the ages of seven and 15 years are involved in the illegal sale of petroleum products to buy arms. Armed robberies are also used as a way to fund APC activities. The report suggests that traditional and religious leaders have incited the APC to ignite conflict between groups due to the material gains they can make when mediating disputes.

### ***Relations with the community***

The attitudes of local communities towards the APC, mostly the almarajiris and the hisbah, have been characterised by fear and dismay. Many people from other ethnic groups have relocated from the North as a result of frequent violent conflict (IPCR, 2003).

#### **Public Health Statistics**

Year	1998	1999	2000	Sub total
Firearms	246	125	89	460
Traffic accidents	2127	1763	2049	5939
Total	2373	1888	2138	6399

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria Annual Abstract of Statistics Abuja, 2001 (ed), Nigerian Police Report

Table 2: Accident and firearm related mortality cases in six states of Southwest Nigeria (Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo)

Year	1998	1999	2000	Sub total
Firearms	102	78	71	251
Traffic Accident	552	476	727	1750
Total	654	554	793	2001

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria Annual Abstract of Statistics Abuja, 2001 (ed), Nigerian Police Report

Table 3: Accident and firearm related mortality cases in five states of Southeast Nigeria (Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo)

Year	1998	1999	2000	Sub-total
Firearms	91	162	100	353
Traffic accidents	1323	918	1561	3802
Total	1414	1080	1661	4155

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria Annual Abstract of Statistics Abuja, 2001 (ed), Nigerian Police Report

Table 4: Accident and firearm related mortality cases in seven states of Northwest Nigeria (Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara)

Year	1998	1999	2000	Sub-total
Firearms	215	220	114	549
Traffic accidents	1045	1118	1166	3329
Total	1260	1338	1280	3878

Source: Federal Republic of Nigeria Annual Abstract of Statistics Abuja, 2001 (ed), Nigerian Police Report

Table 5: Accident and firearm related mortality cases in six states of the south Niger Delta (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta and Edo)

## Special Focus: Small Arms and Light Weapons in Nigeria

Militant youth from rival armed groups in Nigeria use weapons ranging from AK47s and grenade launchers to the locally made *ogbunigwe*.<sup>27</sup> The *ogbunigwe* is a crudely built but highly effective bazooka used by the Egbesu Boys in Warri, Niger Delta on August 8, 2003.

The deployment of Nigerian troops elsewhere in West Africa is perceived as a major cause of the leakage of small arms into the hands of unauthorised persons (IPCR, 2003). Disgruntled military officers, serving and retired, are said to be providing the growing private armies with sophisticated weapons. The Inspector General of Nigerian Police reported that more than 7,739 rounds of ammunition and 872 weapons were recovered from unauthorised individuals and armed groups in the last year.<sup>28</sup>

In the Niger Delta, oil multinationals are accused of importing small arms and ammunitions and using armed soldiers to protect their staff and facilities.<sup>29</sup> Shell, confronted with the evidence of gun running, said that they only imported 107 handguns. Chevron was accused by Ijaw youth of supplying weapons to the Itsekiri youth and also by the Itsekiri of giving money to the Ijaws to buy weapons. The Ilaje community of Ondo state claimed that the US oil company Chevron imported armed soldiers who clashed with demonstrating youth occupying their parable oil facility: two youth were shot dead and several others injured during the confrontation.

Inefficiency and corruption of law enforcement agencies is partly responsible for a lack of small arms control. While writing on public security in Nigeria, Atoyebi (2003) argues that due to the free flow of illicit arms into the country, weapons now exchange hands freely. Atoyebi also notes that the type of firearms found among militant youth and armed robbers are often far more sophisticated than those available to the police. The Nigerian customs service recently reported seizing arms and ammunition worth about 600 million naira, or about about five million US dollars,<sup>30</sup> that were being illegally imported into the country. Weapons are illicitly trafficked from neighbouring countries Chad, Niger, Cameroon and the Benin Republic.<sup>31</sup> The porosity of Nigeria's international borders has been a major source of concern to the government<sup>32</sup> and illegal manufacturing of home made guns has been found in the Southwest and North central area of the country.

## II. COAV PROFILES

### Personal Histories

This section investigates the personal history of involved adolescents and youth in three of the groups being investigated for this study (Egbesu Boys, OPC and the Bakassi Boys). Interviews were carried out with 56 youth and adolescents (including 37 members of the groups studied and 19 non-members that reside in the communities where the groups operate), between 14 – 27 years of age in three geographical zones across the country (see Table 6 below). These include the O'odua Peoples Congress, the OPC, in the Southwest, the Bakassi Boys in the Southeast, and the Egbesu Boys in the South.

---

<sup>27</sup> Gar Dogo, a Lieutenant-colonel displayed the crudely built weapon to the press in Warri after its recovery from youth involved in conflict in the Niger Delta.

<sup>28</sup> Article in the *Nigerian Tribune* August 8 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Human Right Watch "World Report 2000"; SIPRI Yearbook 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution: Strategic Conflict Assessment Nigeria Consolidated Reports, March 2003.

<sup>32</sup> IPCC, *ibid*.

In the Southwest, the study was carried out in Lagos, the state where the OPC is active. In the Southeast, the interviews were held in Aba in Abia State, which is one of the territories in which the Bakassi Boys actively operate. For the Egbesu Boys, research was conducted in the Delta states of Bayelsa (considered the group's main base) and Warri, the centre of very violent and bloody encounters between militant Egbesu Boys' members and other ethnic groups, state security agencies and multinational oil companies. Research was also conducted in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, also in the Niger Delta. The research instruments for each of the study areas are contained in Table 6 below:

**Table 6: Research instruments in each of the study zones**

Zones	Southwest	Southeast	South	Total
Study groups	OPC	Bakkasi Boys	Egbesu Boys	3
Cities and towns covered	Lagos	Aba	Port Harcourt, Yenagwa and Warri.	5
Semi-structured interviews with involved youth/adolescents	17	10	10	37
Semi-structured interviews with non-involved youth/adolescents	9	5	5	19
Meetings with leaders of armed group	2	1	2	5
Meetings with rank and file members	2	1	1	4
Focus group discussions with local authorities	2	2	3	7
Focus group discussions with NGO's	2	2	1	5

### **Bakassi Boys**

Using semi-structured oral interviews, a total of 15 respondents (10 adolescent and youth members of the Bakassi Boys and five adolescents and youth who are not members of the group but from the local community) were interviewed in Aba. Table 7 below shows the socio-economic characteristics of the members that responded to the survey. This includes data on age, sex, marital status, religious affiliation, ethnic origin, education and occupation before joining the Bakassi Boys.

**Table 6: The socio-economic characteristics of Bakassi Boy respondents to the field survey**

Age	Number	Percentage
14 -15 years	0	0
16 -17 years	4	40
18 -19 years	1	10
20 -21 years	2	20
22 -23 years	2	20
24- 25 years	0	0
26 - 27 years	1	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	10	100
Female	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	2	20
Single	8	80
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Christianity	8	80
Islam	0	0
Others	2	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Ethnic Affiliation</b>		
Igbo	10	100
Yoruba	0	0
Hausa	0	0
Others	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Educational Background</b>		
No Education	5	50
Primary	2	20
Secondary	2	20
Post Secondary	1	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Occupation (before joining the Bakassi Boys)</b>		
Apprentice/Student	1	10
Professional (Tailoring, Carpentry etc)	1	10
Trading	2	20
Artisans	1	10
Applicant/Unemployed	5	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>

When analysing the age of respondents we can see that 40% were in the 16-17 year-old age group, 10% were in the 18-19 year-old age group, 20% in the 20-21 year-old age group and a further 20% between the ages of 22 and 23. All respondents were male. Researchers during this study were unable to find girls directly involved in the Bakassi Boys group. Twenty percent of respondents were married and 80% were single. All respondents were Christian and all were of Igbo ethnic origin.

### ***Family background***

Of those interviewed in Aba, 85% claimed they were born in the village. As described earlier, many youth involved in the Bakassi Boys had previously migrated from villages to the city in search of jobs. The majority of those interviewed claimed not to have good relations with their immediate family.

### ***Educational background***

Only 20% of those interviewed claimed to have finished secondary school and 50% did not attend any secondary school at all. One interviewee told researchers that going to school didn't really matter because his initial interest had been to be a trader in the city. All the respondents indicated that they were from low-income brackets of the Nigerian population. A combination of poverty and a lack of formal education among male children in Southeast Nigeria has increasingly exposed youth to recruitment into the Bakassi Boys, who offer a sustainable income regardless of having a formal education.

### ***Economic background***

Before joining the Bakassi Boys, 50% of those interviewed were unemployed and highlighted this as their principal reason for joining. However, other interviewees told researchers that they had been traders before joining the Bakassi Boys. This link with traders is made clearer by the fact that the Traders' Association is an important financial supporter of the Bakassi Boys.

Few respondents indicated any individual financial support from politicians, the local community, ethnic associations, town unions or family within or outside of Nigeria. Significantly, poverty is directly attributed to the emergence of the COAV phenomenon in the Southeast of Nigeria: the income guaranteed by being a member of the Bakassi is critical to those involved in the personal struggle for survival.

### ***Process of involvement***

Although the majority of Bakassi members interviewed in Aba said that there is no specific age for joining the group, it is important to note that all the respondents claimed to have known a lot about the Bakassi Boys' activities before joining. Furthermore, six of those interviewed confirmed that they had started working for the Bakassi Boys at 16 years of age as informants before being formally recruited. Formal recruitment, they explained, took place at 17 years of age and involved a process of interviews and training in order to become full members of the group. They also claimed that at this age they were allowed to carry firearms.

Researchers did not come across any cases of members being forced or coerced to join the Bakassi Boys. According to one of the interviewees, "fighting crime is everyone's concern and all able young adults must get involved." All interviewees claimed to have joined the Bakassi Boys voluntarily. When asked about modes of recruitment and different stages of youth and adolescent involvement in the vigilante group, one interviewee commented that:

*Recruitment of vigilantes is carried out by dividing commercial markets into zones, from which at least six vigilantes are selected based on interviews and on past record. Newly recruited young and middle-aged members undergo training on the rules of the organisation for two months before they are sent out on any operation.*

During an interview, one of the team leaders of the Bakassi Boys confirmed that application forms are sent round the markets in order to advertise for recruitment. Despite interviewed members having claimed to start work at 17 years of age, the team leader told researchers that there are strict criteria for recruitment that includes a minimum age limit of 18 years. The leader did accept, however, that under 18 year-olds may be recruited due to their physical appearance and understanding of the modus operandi of the group.

Interviewees indicated the following pathways for adolescent and youth involvement in the Bakassi Boys:

- a.) Pre-recruitment: some of those interviewed had members of their households or relatives in the community that were already members of the group. Being in such close proximity to Bakassi Boy members is an important and influential factor if thinking about entering the group. One of the interviewees told researchers that his uncle's involvement was key to his decision to join:

*My uncle has been working for Bakassi Boys since 1999 when I was 16 years-old, and I used to keep his gun for him at that time...I developed an interest in joining the group in 2000 at the age of 17.*

- b.) Partial recruitment: informants - according to one of the leaders interviewed during this study, some children and adolescents are 'partially' recruited as informants.

*You know these children they are very smart. They informed us when they discovered where criminals hide out in strategic areas. Although, they are being paid for this, but not much until they become full members after passing the training test for recruitment into the group.*

- c.) Formal recruitment: as noted above, formal recruitment tends to take place when youth reach 17 years of age or above, and this involves formal interviewees and training.

#### **Current involvement**

As mentioned earlier, the Bakassi Boys can be considered an organised, armed group with the backing of government authorities. Decision-making lies primarily in the hands of the Chairman, and the failure to follow his orders or the orders of others in positions of authority within the group is viewed as a punishable offence. As one young member said:

Q: What are the consequences of disobedience to the chairman?

A: *Anyone who disobeys the rules would be summoned before a committee, and there are various forms of verdict available depending on the offences.*

Q: Has anyone ever disobeyed orders?

A: *Yes, many.*

Q: What were the offences and the verdicts of the committee?

A: *Like abuse of firearms will lead to some days in our (Bakassi Boys) cell and summarily dismissal from the group. Young ones in the group normally follow orders. They are the ones sent to arrest criminals.*

As members of the Bakassi Boys, adolescents and youth do not form part of its power structure. In spite of the support they enjoy from the state government, the federal government of Nigeria has instituted a ban on the Bakassi Boys, and due to this political climate, it is not considered pertinent to bring youth into leadership roles. As stated earlier, given the hierarchical structure of the Bakassi Boys, there is a clear relationship between the Chairman and the state authority. Although the Chairman may be considered as being in control of every major operation, particularly since he is directly in charge of the armoury, this can vary in certain situations as some activities or operations may be carried out under the command of youth members. As one interviewee explained:

*Information controls this organisation. Like I am now, I am only 17 years-old. If I give very vital information about a crime or any criminal, I will be the leader of that operation because every member of the group will rely on me...We only answer to the chairman if the assignment is from the State House, but for local operations, anybody that has the information could lead and report to the Chairman later. All that matters is to see the operation accomplished successfully.*

### **Armed violence**

No discussion on organised violence in Nigeria is complete without mentioning firearms. Due to the heavy militarisation of Nigerian society by past military regimes, the Nigeria Police Criminal Intelligence Bureau believes that there are as many as a million unregistered handgun owners in the country. During this study young Bakassi Boy members were asked if they have used firearms and if so, what kind of firearms they are familiar with. Interviewees told researchers that they use handguns, assault rifles, locally made pistols and cutlasses for their vigilante activities and operations. Said one, "We use assault rifles and colt pistols for our vigilante operations because these criminals now use high calibre guns, we now use AK-47s made in the Ukraine."

Some interviewees, such as one 18-year-old, were candid about admitting that they had used weapons like cutlasses and pistols to maim and kill criminals before:

Q: Have you ever shot or killed anyone before?

A: Yes, *criminals*.

Another interviewee told researchers that despite only being officially allowed to carry firearms when formally admitted to the group, most of them started carrying firearms at the age of 16, when acting as informants. In regard to the kind of arms used during these early stages of involvement as informants, a young respondent told researchers that he had handled a small pistol (45 calibre and 9mm) that belonged to his nephew, a full member of the Bakassi Boys at the time. "I used to carry these pistols for night patrol when my nephew travelled to Onitsha for business. I enjoyed it a lot because it made my other friends get scared of me."

When asked if full members go through any practice or formal training on how to use these weapons, one interviewee said that he had had at least three months weapons and crime fighting training. Bakassi youth members saw the use of weapons as important to their work as long as the police failed to do their duty efficiently.

### **Future perspectives**

When asked if they had any desire to stop being involved in vigilante group activities that involved violence, interviewees said they were only ready to do so if the police acted more responsibly and the government was able to rid their communities of criminals. Bakassi Boys interviewed for this study expressed their belief that the primary objectives of the vigilante movement are the protection of ethnic interests and the fighting of crime within their communities.

Education was not seen as a priority by most of those interviewed, who indicated instead an interest in having their own businesses and making enough money to raise a family. An education was, however, seen as important for their children in the future.

*I want to have money and be a very successful trader rather than going to school. You see, the educated people we have in this country today are not the rich ones, so going to school is not my priority but making money as a businessman and providing my family with all the good things of life, including an education.*

In spite of their deep involvement in the Bakassi Boys, interviewees did not picture such a life of armed violence as one that could be considered as a 'good' life for any of their younger colleagues. Those older in age mentioned that they would advise the younger ones to quit because of the dangers they often faced and did not wish for their current or future children to become involved:

*For me, the methods used by the Bakassi Boys are not only wrong, even counterproductive sometimes. The harassment of other innocent citizens and the extra judicial murders that these younger members are exposed to by taking up arms is not the best for them. I will never allow any of my children or little brothers to get involved.*

One 20 year-old gang member said the following:

Q: So how do you wish to stop other young ones from joining?

A: *I will advise them on the hazards.*

Q: Only advice, do you think that would be enough?

A: *I know it's difficult, but I will tell them to go to school or learn a trade or better still, stay in the village where there is peace of mind.*

### **Egbesu Boys**

Despite claims by successive governments of having made advances in youth development and sustainable peace in the Niger Delta,<sup>33</sup> youth and adolescents in the Delta have increasingly become involved in violent protest, hostage taking, armed uprising and community mobilisation to draw attention to both the repression of state forces and oil companies, and the crises of underdevelopment in the Delta.<sup>34</sup>

When talking about the growth of armed insurgency among youth and adolescents in the Niger Delta community, interviewed community residents commented that since the early 1990's there has been an:

- Upsurge in the militarisation of youth and adolescents including the import and local manufacture of firearms and other weapons;
- Unprecedented number of young people as both perpetrators and victims of armed violence;
- Increase in usage of sophisticated weapons in confrontations between ethnic groups or factions in the community and with the state security forces;
- Increasingly violent and repressive policing strategies by the state;
- Increase in territorial disputes between the ethnic groups in the Niger Delta community.

When reflecting on the detrimental effect of armed violence on Niger Delta communities, interviewed community residents said "there used to be a relative peaceful coexistence among the various ethnic groups (Ijaws, Itsekiri, Urobo and others), during the 1980s to late 1990s. Today more and more organised and heavily armed militant youth and adolescents are present in Warri."

Indeed as Saro-Wiwa, father of the murdered Ken Saro-Wiwa<sup>35</sup> has documented, the communities in the Niger Delta "were living in peace before...We were sharing our forest with animals and monkeys but when oil came they started setting one community against the other...and before you knew it, they had started killing our people."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Iyayi, F. "Development in Nigeria's Niger Delta: Any Alternatives?" Paper delivered at the CDD Methodology Workshop, Benin City June 4, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Ifeka, C. "Oil, NGOs & Youth: Struggles for Resource Control in the Niger Delta" Review of African Political Economy. No. 87.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Saro Wiwa was an environmental/minority rights activist and the former leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Saro Wiwa was executed along with eight others at the Port Harcourt prison in Rivers State by the military regime of the late General Sani Abacha in 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Saro-Wiwa, K. 1994. A Month and a Day. Port Harcourt: Saros-International Publishers .

**Table 7: The socio-economic characteristics of Egbesu Boy respondents to the field survey**

Age	Number	Percentage
14 -15 years	1	10
16 -17 years	3	30
18 -19 years	2	20
20 -21 years	1	10
22 -23 years	1	10
24- 25 years	2	20
26 - 27 years	-	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	10	100
Female	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	3	30
Single	7	70
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Christian	4	40
Islam	-	0
Others	6	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Ethnic Affiliation</b>		
Ijaw	10	100
Urohbo	-	0
Itsekiri	-	0
Others	-	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>
<b>Educational Background</b>		
No Education	4	40
Primary	3	30
Secondary	1	10
Post Secondary	2	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Occupation (Before joining the Egbesu Boys)</b>		
Apprentice/Student	-	0
Professional (Carpentry, Tailoring etc)	2	20
Trading	1	10
Artisans	1	10
Applicant/Unemployed	6	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>

Using semi-structured oral interviews, a total of 15 respondents (10 adolescent and youth members of the Egbesu Boys and 5 non-member adolescents and youth from the local community) were interviewed in Port Harcourt and Yenagoa in the state of Bayelsa. The state is in the Niger Delta, which is the main base of the Egbesu Boys of Africa. Table 7 above presents the socio-economic characteristics of the Egbesu Boy members that responded to the survey.

Forty percent of the members that responded to the survey were between 14 and 17 years of age. Twenty percent were in the 18-19 year-old age group, 10% in the 20-21 year-old age group and 20% were in the 24-25 year-old age group. Forty percent of respondents were between 14-18 years-old and all of the respondents were male. Researchers were unable to find girls directly involved in the group. Thirty percent of the Egbesu Boys interviewed were married and 70% were single. All of those interviewed were of Ijaw ethnic origin.

### **Family background**

Ninety-five percent of the Egbesu Boys interviewed said they had been born in the countryside and moved to urban areas as children. Most claimed to not be on good terms with the community elders. Said one 18 year-old member, "The elders in this community have betrayed the youth and we think we should not have anything to do with them because they collect money from those in government and 'big men' in the oil companies...in short they are betrayers."

Although the popular impression of the Egbesu Boys amongst community residents is of a fearful and hostile group, it is clear that their members still enjoy popular support for their actions from their families, traditional rulers, local town unions, and ethnic kin groups. Militancy was viewed by many as the only effective means to compel attention and a speedy resolution of perceived problems with the state and foreign oil companies. Furthermore, community members said that the violent methods used by the Egbesu Boys are encouraged by their family backgrounds, tradition and culture as well as the invincibility credited to the Egbesu and initiates.

### **Educational background**

Only 30% percent of the Egbesu Boys interviewed had completed secondary or post secondary education. It was observed that those who had were in leadership positions in the group. Although high levels of violence in the Niger Delta region have deprived many youth and adolescents of access to education, many of those interviewed did not place a priority on completing their formal education. One interviewee told a researcher that going to school was not important as unemployment is high and controlling local resources could be more effectively carried out by being armed, as opposed to being educated. "After all, we can speak our own type of English...even old mama [old woman] in the village can communicate with that so who cares."

### **Economic background**

Poverty is an important factor in the increase in armed and militant youth in the Niger Delta. Sixty percent of the Egbesu Boys interviewed were unemployed. The majority of those interviewed also commented that their parents fell within the low-income range of the Nigerian population.

Some of the interviewees told researchers that they had previously worked as 'excavators'<sup>37</sup> for oil companies. This kind of job according to interviewees used to be lucrative. Says one 15 year-old: "The oil companies do pay very well for this kind of work but it is not a permanent job as such."

When researchers asked the youth if such work is related in any form to deliberate oil pipeline sabotage, as frequently claimed by government and multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta, he responded that:

*Though there are some instances where major oil pipelines have been vandalised by youth, most times these pipelines are very old and naturally they burst open by themselves...and what do you expect? The poor people go to fetch oil of course! It is our natural property given to us by Egbesu the gods of the land and Omolokun the sea goddess.*

Such acts may be viewed as a response to the increasing socio-economic marginalisation, violence and repression of the state against the people of the Niger Delta. Focus group discussions carried out with NGOs in the region revealed a number of local complaints against the oil multinationals in relation to high unemployment, poverty and the under-development of the Niger Delta region in general.

---

<sup>37</sup> An 'excavator' was described to researchers by interviewees as a person paid to clean up a crude oil spillage when an overland pipeline is damaged.

### ***Process of involvement***

Similar to the youth that join the Bakassi Boys in the Southeast, interviewees in the Niger Delta claimed that there is no specific age for joining the Egbesu Boys. However, the majority of those interviewed also confirmed to researchers that they had first joined the group at the age of 16. Despite this, only when they went through a formal initiation into the group by the high priest at the age of 17 were they allowed to carry firearms. Also similar to the Bakassi Boys, all of the Egbesu Boys interviewed claimed to have been familiar with the Egbesu Boys' activities before joining the group. Says one young member, "adolescents recruited into the group do not ordinarily carry firearms or weapons, they need to be spiritually initiated by the priest [first]. They start with small weapons like jerk knives and daggers."

No cases of young people being forced or coerced to join the Egbesu Boys were discovered during this study. According to one of the interviewees, the "struggle" is a voluntary call to all youth and adults from the Niger Delta to join. One of the Egbesu Boys group leaders interviewed indicated that membership is voluntary and is influenced by personal decisions and patriotism.

Q: How did you become an Egbesu?

A: *The high priest initiated me.*

Q: Did you go alone or did someone compel or force you to join?

A: *Nobody forced me; I went alone after noticing what they are doing to my people.*

Q: How old were you when you joined the group?

A: *I know Egbesu Boys long ago since I was 13 years, but I joined fully in 2003 when I became 16.*

A 17 year-old member commented:

Q: So what roles do under 18 year-olds like you play as members of the group?

A: *We are very active under water and we spy.*

Q: Spy on whom and what? The police, army, oil expatriates or rival ethnic groups?

A: *Let me tell you, you think we are small boys but we are very good swimmers, you know that we lived all our lives here in the river area, so we use these experiences to demobilise boats and we attack, be it police, oil workers or anybody.*

Q: Do they pay you for being a spy?

A: Yes, big money on a good day.

Q: When is a good day?

A: *A good day is when an oil company pays for the release of their kidnapped staff.*

Recruitment into the Egbesu Boys is a voluntary process that involves making a spiritual commitment. When researchers asked a group leader if there are different stages of involvement for recruits, the interviewee said that "young ones less than eighteen years-old understudy the older ones and eventually graduate to full arms carriers after being initiated by the Egbesu priest, who normally resides in the forest somewhere near the community."

Unlike the Bakassi Boys and the OPC, the recruitment process for the Egbesu Boys comprises of registration and initiation, which involves body incision, a bath or sprinkling with Egbesu water and invocation of the Egbesu spirit. Though in theory members are free to disengage from the group if they so choose, researchers found this to be a rare occurrence.

Through the interviewees gathered for this study, the following pathways of youth and adolescent involvement in the Egbesu Boys have been identified:

- a) Partial involvement- Not all youth and adolescent are recruited into the armed wing of the Egbesu Boys. Some of the children are 'partially recruited' as informants. As well as information gathering, these partially recruited members are used for staging rallies and protests.
- b) Armed wing- 'partially recruited' members are selected for formal initiation and may then join the Egbesu Spirit, the armed wing of the Egbesu Boys that carries out militant actions such as forcing the closure of oil facilities, hijackings and kidnappings.

### ***Current Involvement***

Characteristically, almost all Egbesu Boys interviewed attempted to demonstrate their significance within the group. However, as the supreme spiritual head, the Egbesu priest has the final say in any decision making process, followed by the group commander. One member said:

Q: What are the consequences of disobedience to the priest and group commander?

A: *Anyone who disobeys the rules would be summoned before the gods and the priest gives...verdict according to the guiding spiritual principles of the gods.*

Q: Has anyone ever disobeyed orders?

A: Children in the group normally follow orders. They are the ones sent on spy mission under water.

Discipline is maintained through sanctions for infringement of the rules. Specifically, disciplinary actions may lead to fines or suspension from the group and in some cases even some form of physical or other related punishments.

### ***Armed violence***

Most of the seizures, take-overs and occupations of oil installations, kidnapping of oil workers, and violent encounters with state security agencies in the Niger Delta have been traced to the Egbesu Boys. During fieldwork for this study, researchers came across two young members openly carrying locally made pistols. Guns are said to be rife in the Niger Delta, especially in Warri town. According to one Warri resident, "those who are 16 and 17 years-old sell guns on the streets and call it 'pure water'<sup>38</sup> instead of going to school. The persistence of smuggling illegal guns can be attributed to its lucrative nature."

Interviewed Egbesu Boys were candid when admitting to the use of firearms, rifles and locally made pistols during armed confrontations:

Q: If you use guns or rifles can you tell us their names?

A: *Since the MOPOL [Mobile Police], navy and army started using sophisticated weapons against us, and the oil companies started recruiting police and supplying other groups [rival ethnic groups] with modern weapons, we have also acquired highly sophisticated rifles like AK-47 from ECOMOG<sup>39</sup> hand grenades and locally made rocket launchers, which are nicknamed Ogbunagwu, meaning destroyer in our native dialect.*

---

<sup>38</sup> This is packaged drinking water in cellophane sold by street hawkers in most Nigerian cities.

<sup>39</sup> ECOMOG is the Monitoring Observer Group of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Q: So, apart from AK-47s, which other rifles or guns do you use?

A: AK-47 is the most common.

Q: What of the younger ones?

A: *Ah! Immediately you start carrying guns you are no longer a child, you are now an adult.*

Q: Have you ever been shot before?

A: *No. The police only arrested me in Warri once for [involvement in a] violent demonstration.*

Q: Have you ever shot or killed someone before?

A: Yes.

When researchers asked if members go through any practice or training on how to use weapons, interviewees commented that they don't need much training or practice. One 17-year-old Egbesu Boy said they were only shown how to aim and pull the trigger. However, one of the group leaders interviewed told researchers that "all [members of the] Egbesu Boys militant wing be they young or adult are as well trained as any guerrilla fighter in the world. We have a training ground, which we cannot disclose [its whereabouts] to you for any reason, it is well equipped I must tell you."

Researchers also asked some members about their perceptions of firearms. Invariably their response was that they would always take up arms as long as there is a lack of proper plans by the government and the multinational corporations for the future. They also said that only the gun brings them respect and recognition. "You know when we started this struggle softly the government thought we were not serious and they used our oil money to develop Abuja [Nigeria Federal Capital Territory] and collaborate with the oil companies to kill our people. Now that we have the guns, they are beginning to respect and recognise us."

### ***Future perspectives***

When asked if they had any desire to stop being involved in militant groups like the Egbesu, interviewees responded that they are ready to leave the group only when the government stops ignoring them and withdraws armed troops from their communities. Said one:

*To tell you the truth, we are not happy living violently. The Ijaws, Itsekiris, Urhobos, Ilajes and other ethnic groups in the Niger Delta were created by God. You see, when those in power started playing divide and rule oil politics with us and they are using the oil companies against us and killing our people, destroying our environment and land on top of our endowed natural resources, we have no other choice left.*

Paradoxically, while describing members as aggressive and violent, youth and adolescents interviewed for the study regarded themselves as patriotic due to their involvement in the Egbesu Boys. Consequently, older Egbesu Boys appeared uninterested in advising younger members to quit because they are seen as future activists and warriors.

### **O'odua Peoples Congress, OPC**

A total of 36 people were interviewed for the study in the Mushin area of Lagos state, in Southwest Nigeria. This included 17 youth and adolescent members of the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC) and 19 local residents who are not members of the OPC. Table 8 below presents the socio-economic characteristics of the 17 OPC members that responded to the oral survey.

The socio-economic characteristics of OPC respondents to the field survey

Age	Number	Percentage
14 –15 years	2	11.8
16 –17 years	6	35.0
18 –19 years	3	17.6
20 –21 years	2	11.8
22 –23 years	2	11.8
24- 25 years	1	5.9
26 – 27 years	1	5.9
Total	17	100
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	15	88.2
Female	2	11.8
Total	17	100
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	4	23.5
Single	13	76.5
Total	17	100
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>		
Christian	4	23.5
Islam	6	35.3
Others	7	41.2
Total	17	100
<b>Ethnic Affiliation</b>		
Igbo	-	0.0
Yoruba	17	100
Hausa	-	0.0
Others	-	0.0
Total	17	100
<b>Educational Background</b>		
No Education	7	41.2
Primary Education	3	17.6
Secondary	4	23.5
Post Secondary	3	17.6
Total	17	100
<b>Occupation ( Before joining the OPC)</b>		
Apprentice/Student	4	23.5
Professional (Carpentry, Tailoring etc)	3	17.6
Trading	1	5.9
Artisans	1	5.9
Applicant/Unemployed	8	47.1
Total	17	100

As can be seen from the above table, 11.8% of the OPC members questioned were in the 14-15 year-old age group, 35% were between 16 and 17 years of age, and 17.6% were between 18-19 years of age. Therefore, 46.8 % of respondents fall within the age group of 14-17 year-olds, and the majority interviewed were less than 19 years of age. Eighty-eight percent of the OPC interviewed were male, while nearly 12% were female. Although the OPC has a female membership, they are not generally involved in armed violence. One of the interviewees told researchers that, “we have some women OPC but they only participate in social activities like directing road traffic and working as ushers when we are invited to keep the peace at any social gathering or parties...they are not armed like the Eso and others.”

Nearly 24% of respondents were married and 76.5% were single. Forty-two percent of the interviewees participated in ancestor worship. All interviewees were Yoruba and to mark their ethnicity wear white clothing and tie red or white bands on their heads during vigilante operations and when involved in armed confrontations.

The OPC is the principle militant ethnic and vigilante group in Southwest Nigeria. The Eso, which carries out vigilante activities, is mostly made up of youth and adolescents. The growing use of armed violence that is a result of the creation of self-organised ethnic security groups from the late 1990s onwards has greatly increased the utilisation and recruitment of youth and adolescent into the OPC. According to one of the OPC members interviewed in the Mushin area of Lagos, “youth and adolescents are regularly employed in the OPC, and they act as vigilantes in their various communities.”

#### *Family background*

During this study, 35.5% of OPC members interviewed by researchers in Lagos said that they were born in suburban areas of Southwest Nigeria, while 65% claimed they were born in the city of Lagos. Sixty-eight percent of interviewees said that they did not live with their parents and have not seen their parents for a long time. The traditional family system is supposed to provide the basic vehicle for socialisation of the child but the breakdown of the family caused by the socio-economic crisis has left young people vulnerable to recruitment into organised armed groups like the OPC. As one teenage member said,

*Since my parents came to Lagos things have not been easy for us. My father left the house one day and never came back. No one, even my mother, knows his whereabouts. I used to be a bus conductor to make some money to help my younger ones but my Alaye [godfather] introduced me to this OPC work during that election [2003] time and it pays me more than the bus conductor job. I joined when I was 15.*

#### *Educational background*

Nearly 24% of interviewees claimed to have finished secondary school, while 17.6% said they dropped out of primary school and 41.2% said they had never had any formal education at all. Interviewees cited poverty as the primary reason for not attending school:

*I could not go to school because my parents are not educated and could not send me to school as well. My father is very poor and has about three wives, number of children I don't know...I am sure if I had gone to school like you [researchers] I would not have joined the OPC. I swear! I would have become a lawyer!*

#### *Economic background*

Forty-seven percent of the members interviewed were unemployed before working for the OPC. All interviewees were from low-income families. Some interviewees told researchers that they had previously worked as commercial drivers, conductors, and roadside mechanics, all very low paid jobs. Most respondents said that they had joined the OPC in order to earn a living. Said one 16 year-old, “Being an OPC member most especially as Eso you earn some good pay and you will be given a gun to work with and people who know you respect you more than when you don't have any job.”

#### *Process of involvement*

Although a specific age for joining the OPC was not given during interviews, most had joined the OPC at the age of 15. Those young people that were part of the Eso were between the ages of 15 and 20. Many of the respondents were recruited as school dropouts that had joined Area Boy gangs or other delinquent groups.

Most of the members interviewed claimed that they were not forced or coerced to join the OPC. One interviewee explained to researchers that he joined the OPC as a way of identifying with his ethnic group:

Q: How old are you now?

A: I will be 20 in March.

Q: How old were you when you joined OPC?

A: I was 16.

Q: What are the main reasons for your involvement in the OPC group?

A: I think it is another way of identifying with my ethnic group, the O'odua.

The OPC receives support from ethnic associations and traditional rulers who facilitate the membership process by distributing OPC application forms in each local community within the state of Lagos. Traditional rulers are the custodians of the culture and heritage in Yoruba land and they see the OPC as protectors of these. According to one interviewee, recruitment forms are usually obtained from the traditional rulers, while prominent politicians in the community recommend prospective members.

### ***Current involvement***

Although, discipline within the OPC is maintained through suspension or expulsion for breaking the rules, interviewees confirmed to researchers that disciplining for such acts could lead to physical torture, particularly when the offence committed is related to stealing or armed robbery. Gani Adams is ultimately responsible for decision making within the group of militant OPC youth.

Q: What are the consequences of disobedience?

A: *Any one who disobeys the rules would be disciplined and suspended from the group.*

Q: Has anyone ever disobeyed orders?

A: *Yes, many who have been disrespectful have been asked to leave the OPC group.*

A 16 year-old member comments on the role of Gani Adams: "Gani is our Alaye Baba [Godfather] and mostly the brains behind every major activity of the group since he is directly in charge of the militant youth wing. Nobody dare disobey him."

Another goes on to say:

Q: Is there any other Alaye apart from the leader?

A: No!

Q: And what is your position in the group?

A: I am just an Eso and one of the Alaye's bodyguards.

Q: What happened if you disobeyed the Alaye's orders?

A: That is a serious offence that can lead to serious punishment like expulsion or physical beating.

Researchers observed that the younger members of the group mostly work in lower ranking positions, such as within the Eso.

### ***Armed violence***

When researchers asked one of the group leaders about the armed roles of adolescents in the OPC, he claimed that "young ones less than seventeen years-old are not allowed to carry firearms. They are, however, allowed to carry machetes during conflict with other groups."

During this study members of the OPC interviewed in Lagos were asked if they had ever used firearms and what kind of firearms they were familiar with. One interviewee told researchers, "We frequently used locally made guns, rifles, and machetes during conflict and for the vigilante work or maintaining peace and security at social functions."

A 17 year-old member commented that:

Q: What kind of firearms have you used?

A: *We use assault rifles for the vigilante work and highly sophisticated ones like AK-47s are used when there is a conflict with police or any other rival group.*

Q: Do you receive any training on how to use these arms?

A: No! Because I don't think I need any training.

Q: Have you ever been shot before?

A: Yes.

Q: Who shot you and how?

A: *The police shoot me in the leg during the Idi-araba riot in Lagos.*

Q: Have you ever shot or killed someone before?

A: Yes.

Q: How do you feel killing someone?

A: *I don't know, maybe good or bad.*

In contrast to the Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta, none of the OPC youth or adolescents spoken to by researchers were carrying arms openly during this interview. As one of the interviewees told researchers, "We are only allowed to carry arms at night when we are on vigilante duty or when the leader is attending a meeting or any other official function during the day."

When asked why it is necessary to use firearms, respondents said that they take up arms as a form of self-defence against criminals. One interviewee claimed, "guns are our only means for self-defence because this vigilante work is very dangerous and at times during a fight with other groups you need these guns to defend yourself against police or the group you are fighting."

One of the interviewees commented that OPC recruits do receive some weapons training, although it is minimal:

*Most of the OPC militant wing already has an idea of how to use guns before joining the group be it young or old. Some of the adults were hunters, while the younger ones were criminals [such as] armed robbers. I can count for you how many of us have gone to jail on robbery charges before joining OPC.*

### **Future perspectives**

When asked if they had any desire to leave the OPC, interviewees responded that they are ready to leave the group when they get good jobs or have access to school:

*To tell you the truth, being part of OPC is a very dangerous thing but I think for now I have no choice because this is the only thing that fetches me my daily livelihood. I know one day I will return to school and live normally. This is not a normal life. I know it is not because you can die any day or at any time.*

Older members of the group had fewer dreams for the future and said that they would be ready to defend their nationality for as long as they live. Significantly, they see themselves as protectors of their communities from criminals and other hostile groups, describing themselves as either vigilantes or security guards. They were also said to have sensitised the local populace and raised social and cultural awareness among the Yoruba. As one of the interviewees explained, "Quitting the OPC is like losing ones identity and not knowing where one is coming from."

Some interviewees accepted that as well as having a protective role their presence in the community could also pose a threat to peaceful co-existence. This was due to threats of violence against members of other ethnic groups and innocent citizens. They also suggested that by putting too much emphasis on parochial ethnic interests, a propensity for using violence to resolve conflict and operating outside of the law, they were not a completely positive presence.

Q: What is the usefulness of the OPC to society?

A: *As OPC, people fear you and they believe that you can cause any trouble at anytime.*

Q: So does that makes you feel bad [and want] to leave the group?

A: *Yes, I don't truly like the way people feel about me around here, even most of the time they think I am only for the Yoruba people and not law abiding [citizens].*

When asked about what could help those already involved in ethnic militias like the OPC to leave the group, interviewees that felt more positive about the role of the OPC in the community didn't see this as a relevant question:

These youth and adolescents are serving as vigilante and security guards in their local communities and therefore promoting peace and security. Also, [there is a] considerable contribution [in] promoting ethnic cohesion and in the provision of social support in the local communities. In this case, I don't see any important reason for encouraging those involved to leave.

Others felt that for future generations to not be involved in the group, the government would have to guarantee other alternatives such as education.

Q: How do you think future generations can be prevented from joining the OPC?

A: *I think it is the fault of the government.*

Q: What has the Government got to do with this?

A: *If they would provide job opportunities for the youth and make education easily accessible for the adolescents, many would be prevented from joining the OPC.*

### **III. SOCIAL PROGRAMMES TARGETING COAV**

This section explores and evaluates public policy and social programmes designed by government, non-governmental organisations and concerned institutions to assist in the prevention or rehabilitation of adolescents and youth in organised armed violence in Nigeria. This exploration is based on information gathered through interviews with local government officials, community residents including involved and non-involved youth and adolescents, community leaders, NGOs and CBOs in Lagos (Southwest Nigeria), Aba (Southeast Nigeria) and the Niger Delta.

Relevant government social development projects visited during this research study include the Youth Development Centre established by the Lagos State Ministry of Youth, Sports and Social Development and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). One of the NDDC's primary objectives is to make the Niger Delta a violence free region.

Researchers from this study also visited the Information and Documentation Centres (IDCs) established by the Centre for Democracy and Development. The IDC's primary objective is to gather and make available research information on root causes of armed violence in the Niger Delta region. Centres visited during the study include those in Port Harcourt (hosted by the Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, IHRHL), Uyo, Akwa-Ibom state (hosted by Community Partners for Development, CPD), and Benin, Edo state (hosted by the African Women Empowerment Guild, AWEG).

This section concludes by highlighting issues seen as pertinent if policy makers are to successfully address the problem of youth involvement in organised armed violence in Nigeria.

### **Government**

The typical federal government response to preventing youth and adolescent involvement in organised armed violence as described in this research study has been the banning of organised armed groups and the deployment of armed forces to communities where such groups exist. The tendency for government to frequently use armed security agents (mostly the military and mobile police) as a temporary solution to solve COAV does not address many of the root causes of the problem. This is because the occurrence of COAV in Nigeria needs a permanent socio-economic solution. The proliferation of arms and the emergence of organised armed groups will continue to exist as long as youth and adolescents continue to be unemployed and deprived of social development, such as access to education.

The federal government has banned ethnic militias, including the Bakassi Boys, OPC, Egbesu Boys, and APC, throughout Nigeria. Interviews with most community residents during this study suggest that local political leaders, as well as those youth and adolescents directly involved in organised armed violence, have ignored this federal government directive as many of these groups continue to receive support from state governments and wealthy individuals within their area of operation. In spite of the ban, the militias continue to exist and actively operate in their local communities. Some residents interviewed in Aba during this study held the view that the continued presence of such groups has much to do with the fact that they are more effective in crime prevention in their respective domains than the Nigerian police. During the 2003 elections in Nigeria, politicians and top government officials recruited youth and adolescents from organised armed groups like the OPC, Egbesu Boys and Bakassi Boys as their bodyguards.<sup>40</sup>

Many of those interviewees that commented on government responses to organised armed groups in Nigeria said that that government should establish, improve or expand social investment policies in affected communities so as to provide access to education, vocational skills training and employment as alternatives to vigilantism and ethnic militias. They further stressed that with increasing access to education, self awareness and personal development, those young people who now form the bulk of membership of these groups, would realise that they are being used by politicians and other top government officials as part of an armed power struggle.

---

<sup>40</sup> The governor of Anambra State in Southeast Nigeria recently drafted members of the Bakassi Boys to serve as his bodyguard due to the sudden withdrawal of all security forces from the government house by the Inspector General of the Nigerian police.

### ***Federal policy to destroy seized weapons***

As a direct response to the phenomenon of organised, armed violence, the federal government of Nigeria introduced a policy of destroying all surplus and confiscated weapons. In July 2001, the Nigerian government carried out its first destruction of arms and ammunition seized by security agencies, consisting of 428 rifles, 494 imported pistols, 287 locally made pistols and 48 Dane-guns (smooth-bore flintlock guns).<sup>41</sup> The exercise was repeated in July of 2003.

### ***Niger Delta Youth for Peace***

Governor James Ibori of the state of Delta in the Niger Delta initiated a programme to collect small arms in 2002. Cash, vocational training and job opportunities were offered to young people who surrendered their arms. However, interviewees claimed that the success of this initiative was limited due to implementation problems. As one interviewee confirmed to researchers, the government has failed to compensate some of those who surrendered their arms. Other interviewees also blamed the slow progress of the initiative on a lack of trust amongst youth that the government would be able to fulfil its promise when weapons were handed in.

A government official confirmed to researchers during this study that about 40 young people joined the programme. Fifteen of them were given cash incentives of around US\$300 each and 25 have been successfully included in job training programmes ranging from craftsmanship and welding to furniture making. The interviewee confirmed to researchers that of the 40 young people in the programme, 20 have been fully reintegrated into the community.

### ***Niger Delta Development Commission***

In addition to specific rehabilitation programmes, youth/adolescent involvement in organised, armed violence may be reduced by substantial social and economic development within affected regions.

An example of such an approach is the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in the oil producing regions of the Niger Delta. Established by the federal government, the NDDC has as one of its cross cutting themes the rehabilitation and re-socialisation of young people involved and affected by armed violence through the provision of basic physical and social infrastructure within the region. This includes the provision of electricity and water, decent roads, housing, health care, education, vocational training and job opportunities within the region. However, the initiative has yet to produce significant results, which may be largely due to the rapid politicisation of the commission.<sup>42</sup>

Both the government and the multinational oil companies are increasingly concerned with their image and are investing in community development initiatives that include vocational skill training centres and the provision of micro credit. One interviewee confirmed to researchers that the government, in partnership with an oil company, had provided him about US\$500 in micro credit to buy an engine for his boat.

Researchers visited the Youth Development and Training Centre in Port Harcourt. The majority of young people interviewed at the centre complained that there are no jobs available or assistance in gaining employment after the training is complete.

---

<sup>41</sup> "Implementing the Programme of Action 2003: Action by states and civil society." *Biting the Bullet Project/International Action Network on Small Arms.*

<sup>42</sup> *IPCR, ibid.*

### ***Lagos Youth Development and Social Welfare Centre***

During a field visit to the Lagos State Ministry of Youth and Social Development, one of the officials interviewed confirmed that there is a proposal for the construction of a rehabilitation centre for juvenile offenders on the island of Ita-Oko in the state of Lagos. The centre will also provide support to young members of the armed groups. When researchers visited the proposed development centre site, community residents said that the centre would reduce the incidence of youth participation in organised armed violence and truancy within the host community and the surrounding area.

Through the Ministry of Youth and Social Development, the Lagos state government has embarked on a rehabilitation programme for at-risk youth by employing them to cart away refuse on the roads and christening them Good Boys rather than Area boys. A local government official confirmed to researchers that more than one hundred members of the OPC have been successfully rehabilitated and employed to work as “Highway Managers” (highway cleaners) in Lagos as a result of the programme.

### ***Civil Society***

NGOs have been active in the implementation of programmes that aim to prevent youth and adolescent participation in organised, armed violence in Nigeria. There have been various programmes/projects on peace-building initiatives in response to community conflicts. These have focused on demystifying the participation of young people in armed violence and encouraging dialogue between young Nigerians through capacity and joint problem solving workshops.

### ***Strategic Thinking Leadership Training for Youth in the Niger Delta***

One example of such a programme is the “Strategic Thinking Leadership Training for Youth in the Niger Delta” project that is organised by the Centre for Democracy and Development in Benin City, Edo State. As a precursor to this programme, CDD carried out a consultative meeting with NGOs and CBOs, stakeholders, actors, researchers and human rights activist working on youth and armed violence in Nigeria. The idea was to facilitate a clearer and deeper knowledge of what is happening in regions prone to youth involvement in armed violence.

After the needs assessment and consultative meetings with all stakeholders, a roundtable was organised for a cross section of Nigerian youth from the six geopolitical regions (Southwest, Southeast, South, Northeast, Northwest and North-centre). It was agreed that there is a need to approach the issue of youth development and non-violence from a geopolitical perspective. Based on this, over 30 young people from different sectors were selected from the South region of the country to participate in a two-week leadership training and violence avoidance programme.

The main goal of this programme is to prevent youth violence through a participatory and process led initiative for youth development in Nigeria. The programme works towards peace and total violence avoidance among youth and adolescents.

Two-week training programmes are held by resource personnel drawn from relevant professional fields to work with participants on personal empowerment, computer skills training, leadership skills development, community organisation, conflict management, peace building and negotiation skills, and resource mobilisation and management skills.

Project activities include visits to the State Legislative House, which enable participants to witness a House session and interact with key lawmakers on those policies/issues that concern young people. Community visits are also held in order to give young people the opportunity to interact with community leaders and elders on the means to facilitate youth development and the avoidance of violence in the community.

Over one hundred young people from across Nigeria have been trained as part of the project over a three-year period. This has resulted in the building of a youth network for peace and development in the Niger Delta region. Many of the participants have renounced the culture of violence and returned to school, while some are setting up youth development programmes in their communities helping involved and non-involved young people to choose to not participate in organised armed violence and crime. This has been done through skill development initiatives, facilitating micro-credit programmes for underprivileged youth/adolescents and organising cultural activities to advocate against violence in the community.

Some young people interviewed in Port Harcourt in the course of this study pointed out that a number of local successes have been achieved. However, it is impossible to say if these initiatives have altered the underlying COAV problem in the Niger Delta. According to interviewed NGO workers, some of these organisations have been limited by insufficient capacity and limited experience while others are not reaching relevant parts of the communities and the specific beneficiary groups they aim to focus on, primarily those already working for armed groups.

### ***Area Champion Project***

Researchers visited a religious rehabilitation programme called the Area Champion Project in Lagos. This programme of the World Overcomes Church in Lagos seeks to rehabilitate youth and adolescents participating in organised, armed violence through re-orientation and re-integration. The programme, according to an officer of the church, visits prisons and juvenile centres and provides counselling services to convicted prisoners and juvenile offenders.

The interviewer confirmed to researchers that about 25 young people have been reintegrated into society by providing them with jobs in the church and sending them to school.

### ***Private Sector***

In Nigeria, multinational companies are increasingly involved in community programmes that prevent young people from participating in organised, armed violence. Due to insufficient government investment in education, primary and secondary schools have been established and refurbished by oil companies in Lagos and in some communities in the Niger Delta and were observed during the field visits. However, interviewed community members cited the need for vocational training programmes to teach skills such as soap making, fruit processing and packaging, leather processing, and fish drying and packaging.

### ***Multinational oil company scholarships***

Some multinational oil companies operating in Nigeria, including Shell and Chevron, have provided annual scholarship awards to selected young people from six geo-political zones to attend tertiary institutions in Nigeria. One such programme is the Shell Annual Scholarship Scheme.

According to one staff member of the community development department at Shell Development Petroleum Corporation in Lagos, scholarships are given to students selected from all the thirty-six states to attend Nigerian universities. The objective of the initiative is to provide scholarships to youth in tertiary institutions in Nigeria in order to enhance educational development activities and heighten self-employment. Meanwhile poor academic achievers are encouraged to learn vocational skills and micro credit for the setting up of small businesses.

An annual selection is made based on interviews and written tests for short-listed youth that have applied for the scholarship award. Awards include close US\$500 to successful candidates for each academic year at university and close US\$300 to graduates of vocational training programmes.

The project is expected to enhance educational and economic development of over ten thousand youth within a period of five years. These youth are encouraged to contribute to the economic and social development of their community and also acquire leadership skills during the project. Some youth interviewed emphasised that the scholarship and micro credit schemes could be designed in such a way that adolescents at primary and secondary schools and those in rural villages could also benefit.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The prolonged militarisation of Nigerian society by successive military regimes, mass poverty and unemployment, and the failure of the government security forces to uphold law and order in the country have been identified as key to the existence of such armed groups within the country.

The range of COAV prevention and rehabilitation strategies has been distinctly limited in Nigeria. With government primarily focused on military options and civil society on training and workshops for prevention and rehabilitation of COAV there are major gaps in the following areas:

- Security sector reform relating to a non-military civilian police force;
- Re-integrating children and young people in organised armed violence into society;
- Ensuring that new socio-economic policies and development initiatives are COAV-sensitive.

Given that most armed groups recruit the majority of their members from the “urban underclass” of the unemployed and under-employed, the provision of gainful employment is likely to limit the number of desperate young men on the street who have nothing to lose by joining the militias and vigilantes.

The effective management of the COAV phenomena in different parts of the country depends on the fundamental reform of state institutions and policies. The first major step in that direction is for government to change its attitude in regard to the groups. The federal government recently banned militia groups such as the OPC, the Egbesu Boys, the Bakassi Boys and the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), hoping that this decision would effectively stop organised, armed violence within the country. Banning these groups is not a solution, as their manifestation is a result of the social and political exclusion of much of the Nigerian population. Furthermore, from a practical standpoint, up until now bans have met with little or no success. These groups continue to exist and violence continues to increase. Experience has shown that bans will at best drive the groups underground, therefore making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to be held responsible for future actions.

In order to limit the armed vigilantism carried out by these groups, there is a need for government to embark on total security reform. State security forces including the police need to become an effective and valid presence within communities where armed groups currently dominate. This must include the training of the security agencies in human rights education and the judiciary in juvenile rehabilitation.

Some of the shortcomings of NGOs in preventing the participation of young people in organised, armed violence can be overcome through increased capacity to effectively mediate in community conflict. Civil society organisations should also become more involved in the promotion and implementation of youth development programmes, with a focus on vocational training, as well as promoting a culture of peace through conflict resolution and peace education. It is also fundamental that NGOs design effective strategies for accessing and maintaining contact with the most vulnerable adolescents, including those that have already taken up arms and are members of the groups.

Multinational oil companies operating in affected communities should further invest in social programmes open to youth and adolescents, including the increased provision of primary and secondary schools and job training for parents of particularly vulnerable children and adolescents. Income generation projects for parents will enable children to continue at school and not be expected to contribute to the family income.

There is also the need to limit the influence – often negative – of politicians on these groups. As armed group members succinctly pointed out during this study, politicians are often only interested in using the groups to further their own political interests, even if that results in violence being committed against citizens and communities.

Finally, since it appears that the phenomenon of ethnic militias and vigilante groups will be with us for a long time, there is an urgent need for constant monitoring and informed public policy to minimise their negative impact on the country's infant democracy. It is therefore urgent that the federal government pays attention to the phenomenon and put in place effective programmes aimed at undermining their support base.

## References

- Adekanye, J'Bayo (1998) "Conflicts, Loss of State Capacities and Migration in Contemporary Africa" in Reginald Apple Yard (ed) Emigration and Dynamic in Developing countries. Vol.1; Sub-Saharan Africa, Aldershot, Engl. Ashgate, for UNFPA & IOM.
- Adeleye, R. (1971). "Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria: 1804-1906". Longman Group Ltd.
- Adeniyi, K. (1998) "Youth and Nation Building: A continuing Challenge in Nigeria" in Youth and the City: A case Study of Lagos Workshop proceeding. Lagos; DERECCO
- Agbaje, A. (2002) "The Historical Antecedent of the Phenomenon of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria" a paper presented at the conference on urban violence, ethnic militias and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Organized by the Initiative for Media and Society, Lagos April 23-26.
- Akani, C. (2002) "The Nature of Conflicts in the Niger Delta", a paper presented in a two day workshop in conflict management for NGOs at Abraka, Delta State.
- Akinyele, R.T. (2001) "Ethnic Militancy and National Stability in Nigeria: a case study of the O'odua Peoples Congress" Africa Affairs, Vol. 1000.
- Alagoa E (1999) 'Survival, Organs of the Chikoko Movement" Oil Watch Africa network Interview, No. 001, August 1999.
- Alkali, et al (1993) "Islam in Africa": Proceeding of the Islam in Africa conference. Spectrum Books Ltd, Ibadan
- Amnesty International (2000) "Nigeria: Fear of Human Rights Violations as Troops Pour into the Niger Delta" Annual Report: Nigeria, Library-News Service 220/99 AI Index: AFR/99 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGAFR440041999>
- Anifowose, R. (2000) "Urban violence in Nigeria: The case of the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC) Militia" being a paper presented at the faculty of social science conference on Industrialization, Urbanization and Development in Nigeria, 1950-1999 and beyond. University of Lagos November 15 and 16.
- Asobie, A. (1999). "Military Rule, Militarism and Violence in Tertiary Institutions" in Ogunye Jiti et al (ed) Citadels of Violence. CDHR publication, Lagos.
- Atoyebi, A.O. (2003). "Ethnic Militia Groups, Public Security and Police Roles in Nigeria" A paper presented at SASA Congress in South Africa.
- Awe, B. (1964) "The Rise of Ibadan as a Yoruba Power." D. Phil Thesis submitted to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Babawale, T. (2001) "The Rise of Ethnic Militias, Delegitimation of the State, and the Threat to Nigerian Federalism" West Africa Review: Vol. 3, 1.
- Bande, T. (1998) "General Survey of Conflicts in the North-West Zone" a paper presented at the conference on 'Enhancing Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria' Sokoto, organized by the Centre for Peace and conflict Resolution, National War college, Abuja.

Bello, O. (1994) "Islamic Education in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Nigeria" in Sule-Kano (2002) The Nigerian Youth and the Nigerian State. CSSRD monograph Series. No, 4

CDHR (2000) "Boiling Point" A publication on the crisis in the oil producing communities in Nigeria; Lagos.

———— (1999) "1998 Report on Human Rights Situation in Nigeria" CDHR, Lagos.

———— (1997) "Annual Report on Human Rights situation in Nigeria" CDHR, Lagos

———— (1998) "Nigerian Students and the Challenges of Leadership" CDHR is the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, Lagos.

CLO (2001) "Blood Trail: Repression and Resistance in the Niger Delta" Lagos.

————(1999) 1997 "Annual Reports" A CLO Report on the State of Human Rights in Nigeria. CLO is Civil Liberties Organisation, Lagos.

Douglas, O and Ola, D (1999) "Defending Nature, Protecting Human Dignity-Conflicts in the Niger Delta": Monique Mokenkamp et al (eds) in Searching for Peace in Africa. Utrecht: European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation in Cooperation

Enemu, C (1998) "Youth, the City and Globalisation: A Socio-political Perspective" in Youth and the City: A study of Lagos workshop proceedings. Lagos, DEREKO.

ERA Environmental Rights Action (2001), the ERA Handbook on the Niger Delta. Benin City Nigeria.

Eson, O.P. (2000) The Political Economy of Oil Extraction in Nigeria. In CDHR publication "Boiling Point" Lagos.

Fayemi, J'K. (2001) "Sharia: Democracy and the Constitutional Reform Agenda in Nigeria" Democracy and development Quarterly Journal Vol. 2, No. 5 January-March 2001.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2001) National Youth Development Policy, Programme and Implementation Strategies. Abuja, FGN.

————(2001) "Children and Women in Nigeria". A wake up call situation Assessment and Analysis.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (1992) Population Census Report

Global IDP Project Newsletter January (2002) "Keeping up with Internal Displacement: A Global Challenge [www.idpproject.org](http://www.idpproject.org)

Human Right Watch (2003) "Nigeria; The O'odua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence". New York, vol.15, No. 4 (A)

————(2002) Nigeria; The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture". NY, Vol. 14, No. 5 (A)

————(1999) "The Price of Oil" HRW, New York. [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)

Ihonvbere, J.O. (2000) "A Recipe for Perpetual Crises: The Nigerian State and the Niger Delta Question" Wumi Raji et al (ed) Boiling Point, CDHR Lagos.

IPCR Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (2003) "Nigeria; Strategic Conflict Assessment, Consolidated and Zonal Reports" Abuja.

Iyayi, F. (2003) "An Integrated Approach to the development of the Niger Delta" a paper presented at the forum of Researchers, Policy makers and Activist working on the Niger Delta organized by the Centre for democracy and Development, Lagos August 22-23 2003.

—————(2000) "Oil Companies and the Politics of Community Relations in Nigeria" In Wumi Raji et al (ed) Boiling Point, CDHR, Lagos.

Momoh, A. (1999) "Area Boys and Girls and Modes of Livelihood in Nigeria" Paper presented for the children question in Nigeria project workshop, CODESRIA, August 21<sup>st</sup> 1999, Ota, Nigeria.

National Population Commission NPC (1998) 1991 Population Census of the Federal republic of Nigeria: Analytical Report. Abuja, Nigeria.

National Programme of Action on Survival, Protection and Development (1992) federal Government of Nigeria, Abuja Nigeria.

Ndegwa, S. (1997) "Citizenship and Ethnicity: An Examination of Two transition moments in Kenya Politics" American Political Science Review, al, 3.

Newswatch Magazine (2000) "Editorial" Lagos, 10 January.

Nigeria National Youth Development Policy (2001) Federal Republic of Nigeria, Abuja, Nigeria.

Ogunbunmi, K. (1999). "Spreading the Struggle: A Review of the Human Ecosystem of the Niger Delta" An ERA Handbook, Benin City.

Okonta, I. (2000) "The Lingering Crisis in Nigeria's Niger Delta and Suggestions for a Peaceful Resolution" Working paper for the Centre for Democracy and Development CDD, No 1.

—————(1999) "Litmus Test: Obasanjo and the Niger Delta" ERActon January-March, 1999.

Olaniyan, O.A. (2002) "O'odua Peoples Congress as an Armed Ethnic Militia". Being an M.Sc Research Thesis, Department of Political science University of Ibadan.

Olaniyan, O. (2000). "The Role of Household Endowment in Determining Poverty in Nigeria." (Working paper).

Olorode, O (2000) "The Crises in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria" In Boiling Point a cdhr publication on the crises in the oil producing communities in Nigeria.

Olorode, O. (1995) "Genetic Resources, Biodiversity, Environment and Development". A conference paper presented at 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Genetic Society of Nigeria, University of Uyo.

Onibokun, A.G. and Kumuyi, A.J. (1996). "Urban Poverty in Nigeria." Ibadan, CASSAD.

Osuoka, I.A. (2002) Politics and Agenda of Nationality Resistance: The Case of the Ijaw of the Niger Delta" being a paper presented at a conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic militia and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, organized by the Institute for Media and Society, Lagos, April 23-26.

PADEP (2002). "Preliminary Assessment of the Needs of Nigerian Youth in Conflict". Being a paper presented at the learning for Change workshop and conference: preventing conflict through learning 18-20 November 2002 at African Leadership Forum Conference Centre Ota, Nigeria.

Sam, O. (1997). "Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Violence in Jos-Nigeria." IFRA occasional publication. No 10. IFRA/African Book Builders. Ibadan, Nigeria.

Saro-Wiwa, K. (1998) "Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy" London: Saros International.

Smith, Z.K. (2000) "The Impact of Political Liberalisation and Democratisation on Ethnic Conflict in Africa: An empirical test of common assumptions". Journal of Modern African Studies, 38, 1.

Solomon, O. A. (2001) "The Matrix of Ethnicity and Ethno-Religious Crisis in Nigeria's Nascent Democracy." Agwonorobo Eruvbetrine (ed), the Humanistic Management of Pluralism. Lagos, Faculty of Art, University of Lagos.

Soremekun, K and Obadare E (1998) "The Politics of oil Corporations in Nigeria" In Ken-Saro-wiwa and the crisis of the Nigerian State, Olorode et al (eds), chdr Lagos.

Soyombo, O. (1998) "A Methodological Paper on Youth and the City: A Study of Lagos: in Youth and the City: A Study of Lagos Workshop Proceedings. Lagos: DEREKO.

Sule-Kano (2002) "The Nigerian Youth and the Nigerian State" Centre for Social Science Research and Development Positive Leadership Monograph Series, No 4. Lagos Nigeria.

Sule-Kano, A. (1999) "Almajiri Phenomenon in Northern Nigeria: Socio-political Responsibility of the Muslim community". In M.C. Bashar and G.A. Gusau (1999) Nature and Methodology of Islamic Sociology. Islam and Knowledge Forum, Usmanu Danfodio University Sokoto.

Suleiman, I. (1986) "A Revolution in History: The Jihad of Usman Danfodio" .Mansel publication Ltd. London.

The Eye Newsletter (2000). Onitsha Youth Development Organisation.

Ukiwo, U. (2003) "Political Anxiety and Violence in Nigeria: The Politicisation of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria". A paper presented at the Conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic Militia and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria. April 23-26. Lagos.

————— (2002) "Deus ex machina or Frankenstein Monster? The changing roles of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria." Journal of Democracy and Development. Vol. 2.

Umehchukwu, I. (2003) Ensuring Peace by any means necessary: Politics, agenda and modus operandi of the Bakassi Boys". A paper presented at the conference on Urban Violence, ethnic militia and the challenge of Democratic consolidation in Nigeria, Lagos.

Williams, A. (2000) "Sunday Tribune" Newspaper February 6 (Ibadan) p.9.

Williams, O. (2003) "Political, Agenda and Modus Operandi of the Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria". A paper presented at a conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic Militia and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

World Bank (2001) "World Development Report: Consultations with the poor, Nigeria: Voices of the poor-A country Synthesis report, Nigeria .

Adebayo, W. (2000) " Sunday Tribune" February 6 (Ibadan)

Adekanye, J'Bayo (1998) "Conflicts, Loss of State Capacities and Migration in Contemporary Africa" in Reginald Apple Yard (ed) Emigration and Dynamic in Developing countries. Vol.1; Sub-Saharan Africa, Aldershot, Engl. Ashgate, for UNFPA & IOM.

Adeleye, R. (1971). "Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria: 1804-1906". Longman Group Ltd.

Adeniyi, K. (1998) "Youth and Nation Building: A continuing Challenge in Nigeria" in Youth and the City: A case Study of Lagos Workshop proceeding. Lagos; DEREKO

Agbaje, A. (2002) "The Historical Antecedent of the Phenomenon of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria" a paper presented at the conference on urban violence, ethnic militias and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Organized by the Initiative for Media and Society, Lagos April 23-26.

Akani, C. (2002) "The Nature of Conflicts in the Niger Delta", a paper presented in a two day workshop in conflict management for NGOs at Abraka, Delta State.

Akinyele, R.T. (2001) "Ethnic Militancy and National Stability in Nigeria: a case study of the O'odua Peoples Congress" Africa Affairs, Vol. 1000.

Alkali, et al (1993) "Islam in Africa": Proceeding of the Islam in Africa conference. Spectrum Books Ltd, Ibadan

Amnesty International (2000) Annual Report: Nigeria, [www.amnesty.org/web](http://www.amnesty.org/web)

Anifowose, R. (2000) "Urban violence in Nigeria: The case of the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC) Militia" being a paper presented at the faculty of social science conference on Industrialization, Urbanization and Development in Nigeria, 1950-1999 and beyond. University of Lagos November 15 and 16.

Asobie, A. (1999) "Military Rule, Militarism and Violence in Tertiary Institutions." in Ogunye Jiti et al (ed) Citadels of Violence. CDHR publication, Lagos.

Atoyebi, A.O. (2003) "Ethnic Militia Groups, Public Security and Police Roles in Nigeria" A paper presented at SASA Congress in South Africa.

Awe, B. (1964) "The Rise of Ibadan as a Yoruba Power." D. Phil Thesis submitted to the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

Babawale, T. (2001) "The Rise of Ethnic Militias, Delegitimation of the State, and the Threat to Nigerian Federalism" West Africa Review: Vol. 3, 1.

- Bande, T. (1998) General Survey of Conflicts in the North-West Zone, a paper presented at the conference on 'Enhancing Peaceful Co-existence in Nigeria' Sokoto, organized by the Centre for Peace and conflict Resolution, National War college, Abuja.
- Bello, O. (1994) "Islamic Education in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Nigeria" in Sule-Kano (2002) The Nigerian Youth and the Nigerian State. CSSRD monograph Series. No, 4
- CDHR (2000) "Boiling Point" A publication on the crisis in the oil producing communities in Nigeria; Lagos.
- (1999) "1998 Report on Human Rights Situation in Nigeria" CDHR, Lagos.
- (1998) "Nigerian Students and the Challenges of Leadership" CDHR is the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, Lagos.
- CLO (2001) "Blood Trail: Repression and Resistance in the Niger Delta" Lagos.
- (1999) 1997 "Annual Reports" A CLO Report on the State of Human Rights in Nigeria. CLO is Civil Liberties Organisation, Lagos.
- Eemuo, C (1998) Youth, the City and Globalisation: A Socio-political Perspective" in Youth and the City: A study of Lagos workshop proceedings. Lagos, DEREKO.
- Eson, O.P. (2000) The Political Economy of Oil Extraction in Nigeria. In CDHR publication "Boiling Point" Lagos.
- Fayemi, J'K. (2001) Sharia: Democracy and the Constitutional Reform Agenda in Nigeria" Democracy and development Quarterly Journal Vol. 2, No. 5 January-March 2001.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2001) National Youth Development Policy, Programme and Implementation Strategies. Abuja, FGN.
- (2001) "Children and Women in Nigeria". A wake up call situation Assessment and Analysis.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1992) Population Census Report
- Human Right Watch (2003) "Nigeria; The O'odua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence". New York, vol.15, No. 4 (A)
- (2002) Nigeria; The Bakassi Boys: The Legitimization of Murder and Torture". NY, Vol. 14, No. 5 (A)
- (1999) "The Price of Oil" HRW, New York. [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- Ihonbvere, J.O. (2000) A Recipe for Perpetual Crises: The Nigerian State and the Niger Delta Question" Wumi Raji et al (ed) Boiling Point, CDHR Lagos.
- IPCR (2003) Nigeria; Strategic Conflict Assessment, Consolidated and Zonal Reports" Abuja.
- Iyayi, F. (2003) "An Integrated Approach to the development of the Niger Delta" a paper presented at the forum of Researchers, Policy makers and Activist working on the Niger Delta organized by the Centre for democracy and Development, Lagos August 22-23 2003.

—————(2000) "Oil Companies and the Politics of Community Relations in Nigeria" In Wumi Raji et al (ed) Boiling Point, CDHR, Lagos.

Ndegwa, S. (1997) "Citizenship and Ethnicity: An Examination of Two transition moments in Kenya Politics" American Political Science Review, al, 3.

Newswatch (2000) Lagos, 10 January.

Ogunbunmi, K. (1999). "Spreading the Struggle: A Review of the Human Ecosystem of the Niger Delta" An ERA Handbook, Benin City.

Okonta, I. (2000) "The Lingering Crisis in Nigeria's Niger Delta and Suggestions for a Peaceful Resolution" Working paper for the Centre for Democracy and Development CDD, No 1.

—————(1999) "Litmus Test: Obasanjo and the Niger Delta" ERActon January-March, 1999.

Olaniyan, O. (2000). "The Role of Household Endowment in Determining Poverty in Nigeria." (Working paper).

Olaniyan, O.A. (2002) "O'odua Peoples Congress as an Armed Ethnic Militia". Being an M.Sc Research Thesis, Department of Political science University of Ibadan.

Olorode, O. (1995) "Genetic Resources, Biodiversity, Environment and Development". A conference paper presented at 23<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Genetic Society of Nigeria, University of Uyo.

Onibokun, A.G. and Kumuyi, A.J. (1996). "Urban Poverty in Nigeria." Ibadan, CASSAD.

Osuoka, I.A. (2002) Politics and Agenda of Nationality Resistance: The Case of the Ijaw of the Niger Delta" being a paper presented at a conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic militia and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria, organized by the Institute for Media and Society, Lagos, April 23-26.

PADEP (2002). "Preliminary Assessment of the Needs of Nigerian Youth in Conflict". Being a paper presented at the learning for Change workshop and conference: preventing conflict through learning 18-20 November 2002 at African Leadership Forum Conference Centre Ota, Nigeria.

Sam, O. (1997). "Juvenile Delinquency and Juvenile Violence in Jos-Nigeria." IFRA occasional publication. No 10. IFRA/African Book Builders. Ibadan, Nigeria.

Saro-Wiwa, K. (1998) "Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy" London: Saros International.

Smith, Z.K. (2000) "The Impact of Political Liberalisation and Democratisation on Ethnic Conflict in Africa: An empirical test of common assumptions". Journal of Modern African Studies,. 38, 1.

Solomon, O.A. (2001). "The Matrix of Ethnicity and Ethno-Religious Crisis in Nigeria's Nascent Democracy." Agwonorobo Eruvbetrine (ed), the Humanistic Management of Pluralism. Lagos, Faculty of Art, University of Lagos.

Soyombo, O. (1998). "A Methodological Paper on Youth and the City: A Study of Lagos: in Youth and the City: A Study of Lagos Workshop Proceedings. Lagos: Dereco.

Sule-Kano, A. (1999) "Almajiri Phenomenon in Northern Nigeria: Socio-political Responsibility of the Muslim community". In M.C. Bashar and G.A. Gusau (1999) Nature and Methodology of Islamic Sociology. Islam and Knowledge Forum, Usmanu Danfodio University Sokoto.

Suleiman, I. (1986). "A Revolution in History: The Jihad of Usman Danfodio" .Mansel publication Ltd. London.

Ukiwo, U. (2003). "Political Anxiety and Violence in Nigeria: The Politicisation of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria". A paper presented at the Conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic Militia and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria. April 23-26. Lagos.

————— (2002). "Deus ex machina or Frankenstein Monster? The changing roles of Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria." Journal of Democracy and Development. Vol. 2.

Umechukwu, I. (2003) Ensuring Peace by any means necessary: Politics, agenda and modus operandi of the Bakassi Boys". A paper presented at the conference on Urban Violence, ethnic militia and the challenge of Democratic consolidation in Nigeria, Lagos.

Williams, O. (2003) Political, Agenda and Modus Operandi of the Bakassi Boys in Eastern Nigeria". A paper presented at a conference on Urban Violence, Ethnic Militia and the challenge of democratic consolidation in Nigeria.