



Politics as War

The Human Rights Impact and Causes of Post-Election Violence in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Summary

In July and August 2007, warring gangs in Port Harcourt—the capital of Nigeria’s Rivers State—unleashed an unprecedented wave of violence against the city and its people. Gangs fought pitched battles in the streets with automatic weapons, explosives, machetes, and broken bottles. These groups opened fire at random on crowds, gunning down scores of terrified civilians in the streets. People who had been walking home from work on ordinary afternoons suddenly lay dying on the operating tables of nearby clinics. Families have been left struggling to understand why their loved ones were so senselessly murdered.

During a six-week period beginning July 1, escalating gang violence saw several dozen people killed and scores more wounded in Port Harcourt’s streets. Many victims were ordinary Nigerians who were either caught in the crossfire between rival gangs or deliberately shot by gang members. People were killed as they got off buses, sat drinking at local cafes, or tried to flee as gunfire erupted around them. In one case, a young girl and her parents were shot dead as they returned from an all-night church service. In another, seven people including a bread seller and truck driver were shot dead on their way to work.

In addition to violence in Port Harcourt itself, gang violence spread to other Rivers State communities. In the worst-affected communities like Ogbogoro, cult gangs carried out a reign of terror that included murder, rape, and other violent crimes.

This was no random explosion of violence. The bloodshed was a widely predicted aftershock of Nigeria’s rigged and violent April 2007 nationwide elections. Most of the gangs involved in the July and August fighting gained experience and power as the hired guns of Rivers State politicians, who used them to rig elections and intimidate political opponents. The clashes between the groups primarily represented a violent competition for access to illegal patronage doled out by public officials in the state government.

Since the end of military rule in 1999, democracy in Nigeria has been illusory, with elections stolen openly and voters systematically intimidated into acquiescence. Hundreds of Nigerians died in the course of sham elections in 2003 and 2007. The governments that seized power through those fraudulent exercises have shown little sense of accountability to their constituents. The conduct of Rivers State's politicians has sunk even lower than these dismal norms. The violence described in this report was the inevitable result of actions by Rivers' public officials.

Rivers State's government is the wealthiest state government in Nigeria. That position is derived from Rivers' status as the heart of Nigeria's booming oil industry. Rising world oil prices in recent years have flooded Rivers State's treasury with a budget larger than those of many West African countries. In spite of this wealth, Rivers has some of the worst socioeconomic indicators in the world—its people lack access to employment, education, health care, and other basic needs. Instead of putting its massive oil revenues to work developing the state for the benefit of the entire population, Rivers' politicians have largely squandered the money through mismanagement and corruption. Ironically, the young men attracted into well funded gang activity because of poverty and unemployment are helping to fuel the same problems responsible for their lack of opportunities in the first place.

But Rivers' wealth has not just been squandered; it has also been put to work sponsoring violence and insecurity on behalf of ruling party politicians. Prior to the 2003 elections, then-Governor Peter Odili and his political associates lavishly funded criminal gangs that helped rig the election into a landslide victory for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Those gangs used the money at their disposal to procure sophisticated weapons; some of them are now better armed than the police.

Over the years, gangs initially sponsored by Rivers politicians have become involved in other forms of lucrative criminal activity, including the theft of crude oil, bank robbery, kidnappings for ransom, and other violent crimes. In large part due to their political connections, these gangs have committed crimes with near-total impunity. The police have made no serious effort to press criminal charges against or apprehend any significant gang leader, even though several of them have lived

openly in urban areas where their violent crimes resulted in murder and injury to ordinary Nigerians.

Rivers' most powerful gang leader, Soboma George, escaped from jail while awaiting trial for murder in 2005 but the police made no effort to re-arrest him. When he was picked up on a traffic violation in 2007, armed men broke him out of a police station and he was again left untouched by police and law alike.

Some of the same gang leaders sponsored by Rivers politicians are at the heart of the violence described in this report. Much of the July and August 2007 fighting pitted Ateke Tom, leader of the Icelanders/Niger Delta Vigilante group, against Soboma George, leader of the Outlaws gang. Ateke Tom rose from obscurity during Rivers' 2003 elections when he was paid and armed by state government officials to help drive opposition supporters out of his hometown of Okrika. Soboma George emerged from Rivers' 2007 elections as the state's most powerful and politically connected gang leader, with close ties to the administration of Rivers then-Governor Celestine Omehia.

Soboma George enjoyed such a dominant position in the immediate aftermath of the 2007 election that many other gang leaders felt that they had been unfairly excluded from sources of government largesse to which they had grown accustomed. Many of the events documented in this report were part of an organized attempt by Ateke and other gang leaders to violently protest what they saw as Soboma's unfair monopoly on illegal access to Rivers' treasury. By demonstrating a capacity to cause mayhem and plunge Port Harcourt into violence, they apparently hoped to force the government to allocate more patronage to them.

Rivers' post-election gang warfare spiraled so far out of control that the federal government ordered the military-led Joint Task Force (JTF)—a combined force of police, military, and State Security Service (SSS) personnel that operates in the Niger Delta—to intervene and stop it. The JTF quickly succeeded in restoring order to Port Harcourt and other communities that had been overwhelmed by gang violence. Their presence on the streets of Port Harcourt brought a palpable sense of relief from a population weary from escalating violence. They have since managed to maintain a

degree of relative and fragile peace, though they have not managed to stamp out gang violence altogether.

The JTF's intervention has failed in many ways, however. Its forces perpetrated serious abuses against the same citizens supposedly under their protection. JTF personnel have shot civilians dead with no justification, arbitrarily detained and beaten others, and looted the homes of people in communities that had looked to them for security. Overall, however, the conduct of JTF forces has been more restrained and respectful of human rights than has been the case in the past.

Unfortunately, the JTF's positive actions have not been backed with the political will at any level of government to address obvious underlying causes of the violence. The national government of President Umaru Yar'Adua came into office promising a robust and comprehensive effort to end violence in the Niger Delta and to produce economic opportunities for the region's disaffected population. So far this has been shown a hollow promise, with federal government action limited to ham-fisted attempts at organizing peace conferences and no effort to acknowledge or address the real roots of chronic violence in Rivers and other states. The failure of the police has also been especially egregious. Overall the force has failed completely to meet its responsibility to protect Rivers' citizens from violence, and to investigate and arrest those implicated. More fundamentally, neither the police nor government at the state or federal level has initiated investigations into the links between leading Rivers politicians and gang violence.

At this writing, a relative degree of peace has been restored to Port Harcourt and other parts of Rivers State. However, in spite of the JTF's presence, kidnappings and other forms of cult violence have continued to claim lives in early 2008: during the first 10 weeks of 2008 armed gangs kidnapped more than a dozen people for ransom in Rivers State, including two young children. The status quo is not sustainable; the problem has been bottled up but will inevitably explode anew unless those most responsible for generating the violence are held to account.

Human Rights Watch calls upon Nigeria's federal government and police to conduct criminal investigations targeted at all Rivers State government officials credibly

linked to sponsorship of armed gangs, including former governors Peter Odili and Celestine Omehia. Anti-corruption officials should move forward with corruption investigations related to the activities of those same officials; it is official corruption that makes possible the arming and financial sponsorship of criminal gangs. Many existing corruption investigations appear to have been placed on hold for political reasons. Additionally, the new Rivers State government under Governor Rotimi Amaechi should launch a transparent and impartial public inquiry into links between politics, corruption, and violence in Rivers State and it should ensure that the current administration is free of politicians linked to the creation and continuation of those problems.

Methodology

This report is primarily based on a two-week research mission in September-October 2007 to Port Harcourt and other parts of Rivers State, along with interviews with government and police officials in Abuja. In Rivers State, Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed government officials, civil society activists, analysts, gang members, and more than 60 victims and witnesses to the violence. Interviews were conducted in English. In most cases, the names of interviewees have been withheld for their security. Researchers visited neighborhoods throughout Port Harcourt as well as the communities of Bodo and Ogbogoro.

Currency figures given in this report are in naira (₦), which in July-August was worth ₦126 to US\$1 and ₦172 to the euro.

Recommendations

To the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

- Launch an independent public inquiry that includes credible and prominent civil society participation into the root causes of violence in Rivers State. The inquiry should seek to establish:
 - The links between Rivers State politicians (including former governors Celestine Omehia and Peter Odili) and criminal activity, including sponsorship of criminal gangs and organized criminal activities such as oil bunkering.
 - The source of gangs' arms and ammunition.
 - The relationship between the Nigerian police and gang leaders.
 - The problem of impunity, in particular the long-term failure of the police to effectively combat gang and cult violence, protect state residents from gang abuses, or apprehend leading perpetrators and sponsors of violence, including Soboma George, Ateke Tom, and other prominent gang leaders.
- Order the police to launch criminal investigations into all politicians linked through this inquiry to gang violence in Rivers State, with a view to supporting prosecutions where the evidence warrants.
- Urgently revitalize President Yar'Adua's high-profile peace initiative for the Niger Delta, which has thus far failed to achieve any meaningful progress toward its objectives. This effort should include dialogue among governments at all levels, civil society, affected communities, and other stakeholders. Gang leaders and others most responsible for fomenting violence should not benefit financially or enjoy impunity through the process.
- Relevant committees in the Senate and House of Representatives, including the committees on Police Affairs, Human Rights, and the Niger Delta, should conduct hearings into the failure of government policies and police actions aimed at curbing violence and corruption in the Niger Delta.

To the Joint Task Force

- Support and work to initiate a comprehensive independent investigation into all credible allegations of abuses committed by JTF personnel in Rivers State, and hold those implicated in abuses to account through disciplinary proceedings and criminal prosecutions.
- Establish effective channels for residents to report incidents of abuse carried out by JTF personnel, and ensure that each is followed up with transparent and credible investigations by a body independent of the JTF. The existing telephone “hotline” is entirely inadequate and largely unknown to citizens of the state.
- Maintain the JTF presence on the streets of Port Harcourt and Ogbogoro until residents can be reasonably assured that there is no further risk of serious gang violence in the absence of JTF personnel.

To the Rivers State Government

- Ensure that local government elections now expected for March 29, 2008 are free, fair, and nonviolent.
- Suspend from office all high-ranking government appointees credibly linked to sponsorship of criminal gangs, pending full and transparent investigation of those allegations.

To The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)

- In the event that ongoing investigations into allegations of corruption against former Rivers State governor Peter Odili do not result in criminal prosecution, publicly explain the reasons for that decision.
- Investigate the financial conduct of other individuals credibly implicated in serious corruption in Rivers State, including Gabriel Pidomson, Kenneth Kobani, Celestine Omehia, and Abie Sekibo.

To the Nigerian Police

- Initiate criminal investigations into the activities of Rivers State politicians and public officials linked to the activities of criminal gangs.

To Nigeria's Foreign Partners

- Call upon Nigeria's federal government to undertake thorough criminal investigations and, as warranted, prosecutions of all current and former Rivers State government officials linked to armed gangs in Rivers State or implicated in serious corruption.
- Continue supporting ongoing initiatives aimed at improving the accountability and effectiveness of Nigeria's police force.

Background: Root Causes of Violence in Rivers State

The epidemic of violence that has plagued much of the Niger Delta in recent years has its roots in the corrupt, violent, and unaccountable nature of politics in the region. While much of the violence documented in this report was essentially a turf war between rival gangs, the spoils those gangs were fighting over included access to patronage dispensed by state government officials. Human Rights Watch has documented the broader links between politics, corruption, and violence in Rivers State and across Nigeria as a whole in greater detail in previous reports.¹

Politics and Violence in Rivers State

Rivers State is the heart of Nigeria's booming oil industry, and its government is the wealthiest state administration in Nigeria.² Due to rising oil prices, Rivers' state government now earns roughly four times the annual revenues it saw in 1999, and at the local government level revenues have increased tenfold.³ Yet—principally because of official corruption and mismanagement—no meaningful progress has been registered in combating the state's disastrous levels of poverty and unemployment.⁴

Many of the young men swept up in gang violence are acutely aware of the vast discrepancy between the wealth their communities produce and the near-total lack of employment and educational opportunities open to them. Many cite these obstacles as a justification for their own resort to violent crime. Ironically, and in a vicious cycle, those young men are fuelling the same problems that have denied

¹ Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria*, October 2007, vol. 19, no. 16(A), <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/nigeria1007>, pp. 80-91; *Nigeria—Rivers and Blood: Guns, Oil and Power in Nigeria's Rivers State*, February 2005, <http://hrw.org/backgrounders/africa/nigeria0205>.

² In both 2006 and 2007 the budget of Rivers' state government has exceeded US\$1.4 billion. This is roughly five times the average across all Nigerian states. Both years' budgets are on file with Human Rights Watch.

³ These figures are drawn from statistics published by the federal government's Ministry of Finance in Abuja. For more details see Human Rights Watch, *Chop Fine: The Human Rights Impact of Local Government Corruption and Mismanagement in Rivers State, Nigeria*, vol. 19, no. 2(A), <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/nigeria1017>, pp. 24-28.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 15-24, 40-49.

them a stake in their state's wealth by working as hired guns to the politicians most responsible for running the state into the ground.

Crime and political violence have both grown in stride with the Niger Delta's colossal failures of governance. In Nigeria as a whole, national, state, and local elections since 1999 have been consistently rigged by means of violence and fraud.⁵ Polls in Rivers State have been among the most violent and brazenly rigged in the country.⁶ In large measure this is because Rivers' oil wealth has increased the financial spoils of political office. One Port Harcourt-based academic told Human Rights Watch that Rivers State has developed "a political culture that views politics as a kind of war."⁷

There is a direct link between gang violence and the corruption and criminality of many Rivers politicians. Many of the state's disastrously ineffective political leaders have kept themselves in place by violently rigging their own elections, something they have in large part relied on gangs of armed thugs to achieve.⁸ The money they use to fund, arm, and support these gangs is generated by the corrupt practices in which these politicians engage. Once in office they either abandon the well-armed gangs to their own devices or continue using them to intimidate their opponents and carry out lucrative criminal activity such as oil "bunkering."⁹

Residents of Rivers State are clearly aware of the dynamics at work. For example, community leaders in Ogbogoro—a town that has been devastated by abuses carried

⁵ See Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics*, pp. 10-28. See also Human Rights Watch, *Nigeria's 2003 Elections: The Unacknowledged Violence*, June 2004, <http://hrw.org/reports/2004/nigeria0604>; National Democratic Institute, "Statement of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) International Election Observer Delegation to Nigeria's April 21 Presidential and National Assembly Elections," April 23, 2007, http://www.accessdemocracy.org/library/2151_ng_election_statement_042307.pdf (accessed March 19, 2008); and Camillus Eboh, "No Confidence in Nigerian Election Result: EU," Reuters, August 23, 2007.

⁶ "Nigeria: Polls Marred by Violence, Fraud," Human Rights Watch news release, April 17, 2007, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/04/16/nigeri15708.htm>; Human Rights Watch, *The Unacknowledged Violence*, pp. 14-19.

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with a Port Harcourt-based academic (name withheld), Port Harcourt, October 3, 2007.

⁸ Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics*, pp. 80-91; *The Unacknowledged Violence*, pp. 14-19.

⁹ Oil bunkering is the illegal tapping directly into oil pipelines, often at manifolds or well-heads, and the extraction of crude oil, which is piped into river barges hidden in small tributaries. The crude is then transported to ships offshore for sale, often to other countries in West Africa but also to other farther destinations.

out by “cult” gang members against its citizens—blamed local politicians for the problems. One prominent local leader told Human Rights Watch:

We want to point our fingers at our ambitious Nigerian politicians who amassed weapons for jobless youth. Life in our community used to be very vibrant. This community used to be the pride of the Akpor Kingdom. Suddenly things started getting out of hand, just before the 2003 election. We saw signs of arms trafficking, arms flowed into the community. When reports of this were made to the police force they treated it with levity. They [the politicians] were above the law.¹⁰

The 2003 Elections and the Rise of Gang Violence in Rivers State

During the 2003 election cycle, state government officials working with then-Rivers State Governor Peter Odili and then-Federal Minister of Transportation Abiye Sekibo armed and hired criminal gangs to ensure the successful rigging of Rivers’ polls in favor of the People’s Democratic Party.¹¹ The two most prominent gangs armed by PDP politicians during the 2003 campaigns were the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Asari Dukobo, and the Icelanders or Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), led by Ateke Tom.¹²

Electoral violence in Rivers was so widespread in 2003 that one local observer group compared the campaign period to a “low-intensity armed struggle.”¹³ Not long after the polls, Asari of the NDPVF fell out with his sponsors in the Rivers State government. State government officials responded by encouraging Ateke Tom’s Icelanders to break Asari’s group by force.¹⁴ By late 2003, Asari’s and Ateke’s gangs were openly at war with one another.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with local leader (name withheld), Ogbogoro, October 10, 2007.

¹¹ See Human Rights Watch, *Rivers and Blood*, pp. 4-6; *Criminal Politics pp.80-91*.

¹² Ibid. For more on these two groups see the annex to this report, “Partial Overview of Armed Groups in Rivers State.”

¹³ Environmental Rights Action, “Election monitoring report on the ongoing Nigeria federal and state general elections, April/May 2003,” executive summary, reproduced in *Nigeria Today*, April 26, 2003.

¹⁴ See Human Rights Watch, *Rivers and Blood; Criminal Politics*, p. 83.

The conflict between Asari and Ateke had a devastating effect on the residents of Port Harcourt and surrounding communities. In the fighting between their gangs, dozens of local people were killed and tens of thousands fled their homes.¹⁵ Hundreds of gang members were also killed.

By August 2004 this violence had shown such a crescendo that the federal government ordered the military to intervene and stop it.¹⁶ In September 2004 then-President Olusegun Obasanjo invited both Asari and Ateke to the national capital Abuja for peace negotiations, which resulted in a truce between the two gangs. But the underlying causes of the violence that their clashes represented were never meaningfully addressed. Neither gang made any good-faith effort to disarm, and none of the politicians implicated in arming the gangs and sponsoring the violence was held to account in any way.

2003-2007: Proliferation of Gangs and Violence

In the years since the 2003 elections, gang violence in Rivers State has steadily increased. Gangs have amassed revenue through involvement in illegal activities ranging from the bunkering trade in stolen crude oil, bank robberies, and—since 2006—the kidnapping for ransom of more than 200 expatriate oil workers and locally prominent Nigerians across the Niger Delta.¹⁷ In almost all cases, the police have turned a blind eye to the activities of the gang leaders and politicians most responsible.

Nevertheless, in recent years a widespread sense of grievance has developed among many gang members who feel that their former political sponsors have reneged on promises of money, jobs, or education. Indeed most of the promises leveraged to gang members for help with rigging the 2003 elections were rapidly forgotten by the politicians who made them. But unlike those promises the gangs did not simply fade away once the polls were over.

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Rivers and Blood*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 17-20.

¹⁷ See Human Rights Watch, *Criminal Politics*, pp. 80-91.

A Gang Leader Denounces his Former Sponsor

Many of the young men who have participated in politically sponsored gang violence now feel aggrieved that they were “used and dumped” by politicians who did not fulfill the many promises they made. The following are excerpts from the personal account of a leading member of the Deebam cult group in the town of Bodo whom Human Rights Watch interviewed in September 2007. In 2006, Rivers State then-Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Kobani employed Deebam to drive Deewell gang members employed by his political rival, Gabriel Pidomson, out of Bodo. The community was devastated by the violence that ensued.

I can't really say if I have killed anyone, but I have been shooting gun and when you release bullet you can no longer control it.

When we came [back] to this town we were prepared for war but there was no stiff resistance that night. But the next day Pidomson sent more arms to his boys, and the battle became very fierce. About 12 were killed on our side, and about 30 on the other side. Up until now there are times you still see corpses around in remote areas rotting from that time. There are some parents who do not even know that their children are dead; they think they have left the community.

He made all sorts of promises that if we worked with him then when things get better our lives will get better too ... [but] Kenneth [Kobani] last came here during the April [2007] election—since then he has not been home again. Then we were seriously in touch then so there would be an election in this place. [During the election] the whole village is one party. If there were ANPP [All Nigeria People's Party] or other parties, we forced them to vote for PDP. There was voting, but it was we who were thumb-printing¹⁸....Now he is not picking [answering] my calls again.

There are times he will just send some money, ₦10,000 or ₦50,000. Maybe he will not ask us to do something but he has something bad

on his mind and wants us to support him. But the last time he sent money it was two days after the election. Just ₦200,000 to share between 100 people. At the same time I lost my [cell phone]—my share would not even cover that.

He needs to empower us and rehabilitate us because we worked for him, or provide employment to us that can sustain us. He has been giving contract[s] to a lot of people—he can attach us to those contracts...

I have threatened to expose him to government, how I was used and so on, but still up until now there has been no rehabilitation or anything. Kenneth is such a person that if you ask him for something like ₦50,000 he will gladly give to you but he does not want you to be on your own, to be independent. So if you want to go and seek admission to university, he will just abandon you midway and you will be helpless ... Sometimes he will ask you to write a proposal and then just dump it somewhere....

You see ... I come from a very piously Christian home and never wanted to kill anyone but now everyone sees me and says, “There is a cult leader.”¹⁹

The 2007 Polls and Their Aftermath: History Repeats Itself

During the 2007 elections Rivers politicians employed many of the same gangs that had been hired to rig the 2003 polls, and those gangs employed the same violent tactics to keep voters from trying to exercise their mandate. Groups of thugs chased away many voters when they did attempt to vote and interfered with the tallying of votes in other places. In some areas hired thugs stuffed ballot boxes, while officials fabricated results for some communities without even bothering to open up the polls.²⁰ The result was another landslide victory for the ruling PDP, and elections that were even less credible than the fraudulent poll of 2003.

After the 2007 elections many local observers predicted that violent power struggles between armed groups would arise just as they had following the 2003 polls. Not long after the close of voting in Rivers State, one prominent activist said he expected a “state of anarchy” to follow the elections as gangs used their guns to secure their own “piece of the action” under the new dispensation.²¹ Events quickly proved such dire predictions right, as the aftermath of the 2007 polls was even bloodier than the mayhem four years prior.

“Militants,” Cults, and Gangs in Rivers State

Beginning with the run-up to Nigeria’s fraudulent 2003 elections, Rivers State and other parts of the Niger Delta have endured a continual growth and proliferation of violent criminal gangs. The sheer number of actors involved—in Rivers State alone thousands of young men are affiliated with dozens of separate armed gangs—makes for a convoluted and complex picture.

That picture is clouded still further by the strange and at-times confusing mixture of purely criminal activity, state-sponsored violence, and anti-government militancy that many gangs engage in simultaneously. Groups such as Asari Dukobo’s NDPVF and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) have cast themselves as champions of resistance to federal government oppression and economic marginalization of the Niger Delta. At the same time members of these groups often act as paid political thugs for local politicians and engage in criminal activities such as bank robbery and kidnapping. Depending on which of these often contradictory roles a group assumes on any given day, its members may find themselves branded as gang members, militants, political thugs, or “cultists.”

The term “cults” in Nigerian parlance refers to a kind of criminal gang with roots in the student populations of university campuses. Since the first cult was established in 1952 at the University of Ibadan the groups have evolved from benign campus confraternities into violent criminal organizations. These cults sow terror among the student populations of many universities and have emerged as the dominant criminal gangs in much of Nigeria, especially in the south of the country. Some cult groups have sponsored street-based offshoots without any connection to university

campuses to bolster the muscle at their disposal.²² In many parts of Nigeria, including Rivers State, some leading politicians belong to cult groups themselves.²³

Immediate Causes of the July and August 2007 Violence in Rivers State

The Rising Power of Soboma George

In the years after the 2003 polls, Ateke Tom's Icelanders (also known as NDV) gang had prospered through a blend of lucrative criminal activity and political patronage. But by the time of the 2007 elections Ateke had been displaced as Rivers State's most powerful and politically well-connected gang leader by Soboma George, leader of the Outlaws gang.

Soboma George, a young man who has been involved in gang activity for many years, had been a subordinate of Ateke Tom in the Icelanders gang until he was imprisoned on charges of murdering another prominent gang member in 2005. He escaped from jail under mysterious circumstances before a verdict was rendered in his case. By that time his relationship with Ateke, whom he reportedly blamed for his arrest, had turned irredeemably sour.²⁴ A significant faction of Ateke's Icelanders group broke away to join forces with Soboma when he emerged from prison. Those men formed the nucleus of Soboma George's Outlaws gang.²⁵

Between his 2005 jailbreak and August 2007, Soboma George—nominally an escaped prisoner wanted on charges of murder—became one of Nigeria's most glaring and notorious symbols of impunity. He lived openly in lavish style and the police made no real effort to apprehend him even as his gang became plainly involved with oil bunkering, kidnappings, robbery, and other crimes.²⁶ His only brush with the law during that period came in December 2006 when he was arrested and detained for a traffic violation, apparently by police officers who did not recognize him.²⁷ Within hours heavily armed men attacked the police station and freed Soboma from custody, easily routing outgunned police officers who tried to defend the station.²⁸ Soboma then resumed his public life without fear of the police, who made no further attempt to apprehend the twice-escaped prisoner.

By 2007 Soboma George was an openly cultivated ally of highly ranking state government and PDP officials, valued as a reliable source of muscle.²⁹ During the

2007 elections some local election monitors reported seeing Soboma and several of his lieutenants traveling around Port Harcourt dispensing money to polling agents and PDP supporters.³⁰ After the 2007 polls many residents of Port Harcourt half-jokingly complained that the administration of newly elected Governor Celestine Omehia had begun to rely on Soboma's gang members to keep other gangs out of Port Harcourt to such an extent that Soboma had become the state government's "chief security officer."³¹

Competition for Access to Illicit Government Patronage

As discussed below, Human Rights Watch believes that there was an established relationship between Soboma George and officials at the highest levels of the administration of Governor Celestine Omehia. And following the April 2007 elections Soboma George reportedly secured several lucrative sources of income, including contracts, paid out or facilitated by state government officials.

Civil society activists as well as members of rival cult groups allege that through front companies Soboma George was awarded a grossly inflated contract to rehabilitate a government-owned stadium, along with a handful of other more basic infrastructure and maintenance contracts.³² Soboma did not have any business experience or other expertise in carrying out such work prior to becoming a powerful gang leader. Many of the same activists allege that they regularly saw Soboma George's gang members take up posts as touts at motor parks throughout the city, extorting money from commercial drivers while police turned a blind eye.³³

Local residents, activists, rival gang members, and even some military personnel interviewed by Human Rights Watch widely believe that after the election Soboma George received a concession over one petrol pump at a busy filling station owned by the government-run Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). All of the revenue derived from that pump's sales—hundreds of thousands of naira each day—allegedly went directly to Soboma George.³⁴ An employee of Rivers State's Petroleum Task Force, a regulatory body, told Human Rights Watch that the concession was given to Soboma because "it keeps him from taking oil with gun[s] at loading points [in the creeks]."³⁵

Human Rights Watch was not able to establish definitively that these allegations are true, but it is clear that the violence described in this report was primarily driven by anger rival gangs felt at Soboma's perceived monopoly on state government patronage. The allegations regarding the NNPC filling station certainly provoked the August raid on the station by Soboma George's rivals—one of the bloodiest events described in this report (see chapter "The Human Rights Impact of Post-Election Violence in Rivers State").³⁶

In the words of one member of the Deebam cult who was involved in some of the fighting, "money [was] coming from everywhere to Soboma" but not into the pockets of his rivals.³⁷ That view was echoed by other current and former cult members as well as civil society activists, local journalists, and other sources. One Port Harcourt-based analyst told Human Rights Watch that by July 2007

[t]he cults [were] locked in contests for illegitimate business space.... They saw Soboma George as one who had several [government] contracts awarded to him and had a lock on government patronage and [they] were simply trying to dislodge him.³⁸

By the end of June 2007 a coalition of gangs bound together by a shared desire to usurp power and wealth from Soboma George had emerged under the very loose leadership of Ateke Tom. Allied with Ateke were fighters from a diverse array of other cult gangs including the Axemen, Klansmen, Deebam, Bush Boys, and other groups.³⁹ In some cases these alliances marked dramatic shifts in previously antagonistic relationships. Ateke's Icelanders/NDV, for example, first gained prominence by driving the Bush Boys out of their stronghold in the nearby riverine community of Okrika to ensure that the area was rigged in favor of the PDP during the 2003 elections.⁴⁰

The Human Rights Impact of Post-Election Gang Violence in Rivers State

In the six-week period from the beginning of July through August 12, 2007, escalating inter-gang violence resulted in dozens of deaths and more than 140 people shot and wounded in the streets of Port Harcourt. The majority of these were ordinary Nigerians who were either caught in the crossfire between rival gangs or were deliberately shot by gang members. In addition to violence in Port Harcourt itself, widespread gang violence subjected other Rivers State communities to patterns of serious human rights abuse. In the worst-affected communities like Ogbogoro outside of Port Harcourt, cult gangs carried out a reign of terror that included acts of murder, rape, and other violent crimes.

Gang Warfare in Port Harcourt

Violence Erupts

On the evening of July 1, heavy fighting between rival gangs was unleashed across the sprawling neighborhood of Diobu, a stronghold of the Deebam cult, and other areas of Port Harcourt.⁴¹ Media reports and eyewitness accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch described a scenario that would occur with increasing regularity during the next six weeks. In several different incidents warring gang members opened fire on one another on busy streets, as residents fled in terror.⁴² In some cases gang members appear to have fired intentionally at local residents. Gang violence is not a new phenomenon in Port Harcourt, but the deliberate and random targeting of civilian residents represented a new and disturbing trend.

In one incident that evening, four young people standing and talking outside one of their homes were shot and wounded. Two of the victims told Human Rights Watch that several armed young men got out of a car and then fired directly at them without warning. One, a young woman, said, “They drove up, stopped their car, then got down and started shooting their guns—there were so many bullets, they left four of us injured.” She was shot in the buttocks; the bullet exited through her abdomen and she required a colostomy. “I still feel pain,” she said more than three months

later, “But in fact I was lucky—many people died in those days. Before that they used to shoot here and there, but that was the day they started shooting *at* people.”⁴³

The violence on July 1 attracted considerable media attention and the concern of local activists.⁴⁴ State government and police authorities refused to make public any casualty estimates but media reports estimated that as many as 20 people, including gang members and bystanders, were killed on that one day alone.⁴⁵ A journalist for Nigeria’s *Vanguard* newspaper who reported these events dubbed July 1 “Black Sunday,” but as it turned out the day’s mayhem was only the beginning.⁴⁶

Escalating Violence

During July and August the neighborhood of Diobu saw repeated clashes between Deebam cultists and gang members linked to Soboma George. Residents described well armed gang members, some with bandoliers draped around their necks, riding in by the dozen on motorcycles and atop pickup trucks. Diobu was one of the few Port Harcourt neighborhoods that Soboma George and his Outlaws gang did not control. The Deebam faction that held sway there had been allied with Soboma George’s chief rival, Ateke Tom.⁴⁷

The fighting in Diobu claimed the lives of an undetermined number of local residents, at least some of whom was deliberately killed by marauding gang members. Human Rights Watch interviewed more than a dozen Diobu residents who witnessed or were victims of this violence.⁴⁸ However, none of those interviewed by Human Rights Watch could identify the specific gang or name an individual implicated in the violence they had suffered or witnessed.

One merchant in the Mile 1 area of Diobu saw a gang member shoot and kill an *okada* (motorcycle taxi) driver just outside his store in early July:

I had just closed my shop. Everyone started running when they [gang members] came. One man was spinning around and shooting indiscriminately. A man was trying to park his *okada* and then we saw him drop. We thought maybe he fell trying to run, but then we saw

someone trying to carry him and then we saw the blood coming everywhere.⁴⁹

The man died from his wounds before he could be taken to a hospital.⁵⁰

While many of the ordinary residents shot during this fighting appear to have been the victims of indiscriminate gunfire, in several cases gang members deliberately killed people seen outdoors. Echoing the words of many other residents of badly affected neighborhoods, one man told Human Rights Watch that on some days in July and August, “It is any person they s[aw] outside, they will shoot him.”⁵¹

In one particularly harrowing incident, three men who had just gotten up from a small outdoor bar one early July evening were shot execution-style by a group of cult members. One man who had taken shelter on the floor of a nearby church heard two gunshots and then got up to peer out through a window. He saw two of the men lying dead in the road and the third on his knees, pleading to an armed young man for his life. “He was begging the boy to stop the shooting [but] he shot him” in the head, the eyewitness told Human Rights Watch.⁵² The incident was confirmed by other nearby residents, none of whom believed that the victims were involved in cult activity themselves.⁵³ One told Human Rights Watch that “the man who was begging [for his life] was just recently married.”⁵⁴

Human Rights Watch heard eyewitness accounts of several other shootings during July. One young man was reportedly shot and killed while trying to peer over a wall to see what was happening in the street during one evening rampage by gang members. At least one police officer from the Mile 1 police station in Diobu was shot and wounded while responding to the sound of gunfire near his post.⁵⁵

A Climate of Fear

Many residents of badly affected neighborhoods told Human Rights Watch that the escalating gang violence left them in a perpetual state of fear and made it impossible to go about their day-to-day lives in normal fashion. One retiree told Human Rights Watch,

We don't know the actual cause of the annoyance of these people. This is the main thing we wanted to identify; there are many rumors but we cannot know. But we saw that almost every evening they would come and shoot at random. And as they were shooting there were killings...stray bullets usually go and kill some innocent people who have no knowledge of what is happening. Immediately they came—sometimes you would see a car coming to drive past and the next thing you know they are taking out gun[s] and firing into the air.⁵⁶

A local community leader told Human Rights Watch that the gang members “want[ed] to flex their muscles to show that they own this place.”⁵⁷

Residents described regular evening scenes of terrifying chaos as gang members paraded through the streets—sometimes shirtless and masked, sometimes dressed in white and black—firing AK-47 assault rifles into the air and threatening or attacking people they caught outside. Some gang members were draped with strings of bandoliers, while others were armed with heavier weapons including rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). Others carried machetes or broken bottles and followed along behind those carrying guns.⁵⁸

In order to avoid being caught outdoors during outbreaks of violence, which usually began in the evening, many residents began closing shops early, moving evening church services to the afternoon, and generally doing anything possible to avoid being on the streets beyond late afternoon.⁵⁹ One tailor near Emenike Junction who had to travel some distance between his shop and home each day told Human Rights Watch that “we were closing at twelve noon in order to reach home before those boys came out.”⁶⁰

Gang Terror in Ogbogoro

There is no starker example than Ogbogoro of a community where cult violence was not just a crime problem but a reign of terror that made ordinary life impossible. Ogbogoro is a modest town near the outskirts of Port Harcourt that has in recent years emerged as a stronghold of the Deebam cult. Local residents say Deebam first came to prominence after being used by local politicians to rig the 2003 elections there.

Deebam members routinely harassed anyone who ventured near their waterfront stronghold, and in some cases subjected residents to acts of terrible brutality.⁶¹ In one July or August incident recounted to Human Rights Watch by community leaders and witnesses, Deebam cultists abducted a young woman who had snubbed the advances of a cult member, stripped her naked, and forced her to stand alongside the road near the waterfront for part of an afternoon. No one dared to intervene and she reportedly was ultimately taken away and raped by several Deebam members.⁶²

Incidents such as these terrified ordinary residents, and by July and August 2007 many had left town for Port Harcourt or elsewhere in what one traditional leader described as a “mass exodus.”⁶³ Community leaders said that those who left included some of Ogbogoro’s most economically important citizens.⁶⁴

On September 7, Ogbogoro’s council of chiefs called a meeting at the town hall to discuss the problem of cult violence. At the meeting elders reached a consensus that they should ask the Joint Task Force (JTF) to enter their town to confront the cultists. But before the meeting ended, Deebam cultists armed with assault rifles arrived from the direction of the waterfront on motorcycles and stormed the building.

The attackers immediately shot and killed two of the town’s traditional rulers, Chief R.O. Amadi and Chief Ebenezer Wali, while the others at the meeting fled. The attackers dragged the body of one chief outside, drove down to the waterfront with it, and dumped it into a garbage heap near the water’s edge.⁶⁵ When Human Rights Watch visited Ogbogoro several weeks later, long streaks of dried blood were still visible inside the town hall where cultists had dragged the chiefs’ corpses across the floor.⁶⁶

JTF forces moved in to occupy Ogbogoro soon thereafter, to the great relief of local residents. The JTF's mixed record in Ogbogoro is discussed in more detail below. Community leaders told Human Rights Watch that when the JTF made their way into the abandoned Deebam stronghold by the waterfront, they found a partly decomposed corpse and parts of several other corpses.⁶⁷

August: Chaos Takes Hold

From August 6 to 11, the violence that had wracked parts of Port Harcourt since July reached its peak. Cult members aligned with the Ateke and Soboma factions squared off against one another in pitched battles that plunged much of the city and many of its communities into chaos.⁶⁸ A trauma clinic in Port Harcourt run by the international humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) on August 6 reported,

We received an influx of patients coming from all over the city. The patients all basically told us the same story. In several different locations across the city, they said that they were in the market, near the bus station, or standing alongside of the road when armed groups either in vans or on motorbikes started shooting indiscriminately into crowds of people.⁶⁹

Eyewitnesses and victims interviewed by Human Rights Watch described similar scenes in different parts of the city. Many said they were suddenly caught up in firefights between rival factions or faced with heavily armed gang members who appeared to be firing at random at whoever happened to be nearby.

On August 6, near an area of Diobu called Education Bus Stop, gang members suddenly opened fire at people along the crowded streets. Two nurses returning home from work in the late afternoon came under a hail of bullets. One of the two women was shot and later died from her wounds; the other escaped with a broken hand. The husband of the woman who died told Human Rights Watch that she perished on the operating table of a nearby trauma clinic. He also spoke of his grief:

Going home is a problem for me. It is hard. Because I lived with my wife. Do you know what that is like? She was the last person I spoke with every day. No sickness, no nothing. Just, “I am going to work, see you tonight.” And then you get a call informing you...At moments I am sick. My home has been shattered and other homes are also crying. She was never sick, but she met notorious hooligans, notorious cult boys. At her burial, [from] every area where she had [worked], someone came forward to say one or two good things about her.⁷⁰

The same day, less than 800 meters away, another woman was reportedly shot and killed while driving her car near Emenike Junction.⁷¹

The violence continued. On the morning of August 10, a schoolteacher was arriving in Port Harcourt by bus after an overnight trip from Abuja. He had traveled to Port Harcourt to inform his sister that their father had passed away a few days earlier. Near Eleme junction, the bus suddenly came to a halt:

I saw men with guns; they had covered their faces with masks so that you could only see their eyes and noses....They were shooting everywhere from the middle of the street—back and forth—not in the air but straight at people who were running all over. The driver of the bus jumped down and ran.

I came down from the bus—we all got out....They kept firing in all directions; I saw them firing from about 100 meters away. I ran but a moment later I was hit. I couldn't get up. I don't know how long I was there but while I was on the ground I saw five other wounded being taken away. The blood was rushing everywhere. Later some people came and carried me away. In the hospital they found four bullets inside of me.

The man was adamant that the men who shot him were intentionally firing on ordinary civilians. “There was no one shooting at them,” he said. “I didn't see any

police on the road....No, they were just shooting at innocent people. The road was totally controlled by them.”⁷²

Similar incidents occurred throughout much of the city. Around August 8, residents ran into their homes to seek shelter at the first sound of gunfire. They told Human Rights Watch that when they later emerged from their homes they found local resident Okey Mba, age about 40, lying dead in the road, shot through the chest.⁷³ On the morning of August 11 the bodies of a married couple and their teenage daughter were discovered at a nearby intersection inside of their car. Apparently they had been shot dead early that morning while driving home from an all-night church service. No witness to their killing came forward.⁷⁴ On one day in early August several ethnic Hausa traders were reportedly shot near a market at Eminike junction by gang members rampaging through the area.⁷⁵

Ateke Tom’s Attack on the NNPC Filling Station

Early on the morning of August 11, cult fighters aligned with Ateke Tom staged an armed attack on a busy sixteen-pump NNPC filling station located between Government House and the old downtown area of Port Harcourt. As discussed above (see “Background”), the NNPC station was attacked because rival gang members believed that Soboma George was receiving significant sums of government patronage through his partial control over the station’s revenues.⁷⁶

Human Rights Watch interviewed several people who were either in the area working or went to the scene of the fighting immediately after the attack. Some witnessed what they estimated to be 20 to 30 gang members approaching on motorcycles, two to a bike.⁷⁷ Witnesses said that the attackers were armed with firearms, machetes, and locally made “dynamite.” The attack largely destroyed the NNPC station. It also claimed the lives of several bystanders and an unknown number of attackers.

Persons who arrived on the scene after the attack told Human Rights Watch that they saw at least seven people lying dead in the road near the filling station, all of whom had been shot. The dead included a van driver shot through the head, his cigarette still dangling from his mouth, and a bread seller who had been making deliveries when the attack began. The remaining deceased were not known to those

interviewed by Human Rights Watch. One journalist told Human Rights Watch that later that day he visited the morgue at the Braithwaite Memorial Hospital and counted 11 bodies bearing signs of gunshot wounds brought into the morgue that day.⁷⁸

The Scale of Civilian Casualties in Port Harcourt

From July 1 through August 12, when the Joint Task Force (JTF) intervened to restore order, Human Rights Watch estimates that at least several dozen civilian residents of Port Harcourt were deliberately killed or were killed in the crossfire between rival gangs; at least 150 more people were shot and wounded. Those figures do not include most of the gang members who were wounded or killed during the violence.

Residents Wounded in the Fighting

Medical personnel told Human Rights Watch that during the six-week period from July to mid-August, at least 148 people were treated for gunshot wounds in Port Harcourt. The large majority of those injuries were directly linked to the violence described above.⁷⁹

According to medical professionals, residents of affected communities, and civil society activists, the vast majority of people suffering gunshot wounds sought treatment at an MSF trauma clinic at Teme Hospital in Diobu. MSF publicly reported that their clinic treated 74 gunshot wounds in July—at the time their worst month on record—followed by a further 72 gunshot victims in the first two weeks of August. The clinic admitted 18 persons with gunshot wounds on July 1 and 21 and on August 6; roughly 8 per day on August 7-9; and 15 people on August 11, the day of the fighting near the NNPC filling station.⁸⁰

In addition to the wounded who were treated at Teme Hospital, a surgeon at Braithwaite Memorial Hospital told Human Rights Watch that the hospital had treated five people who were shot and wounded during the August fighting.

Fatalities

Accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch yielded eyewitness reports of more than a dozen killings of ordinary residents by cultists.⁸¹ Employees of the private Kpainma mortuary in Diobu told Human Rights Watch that it received a dozen dead who had lost their lives during the fighting; some of those may have been the same people whose deaths were recounted to Human Rights Watch by witnesses around Diobu. Teme Hospital in Diobu reported that seven of its patients died from gunshot wounds suffered during the first two weeks of August. At least four people died while receiving medical care for gunshot wounds suffered in July.⁸²

Rivers State government officials and the Nigerian police have not produced any official casualty figures. Some officials appeared to be downplaying the extent of the casualties, while others took active steps to prevent the dissemination of that information.⁸³

In an interview with Human Rights Watch, Rivers State Commissioner of Police Felix Ogbaudu would not provide any figures or estimates of civilian casualties, citing without explanation a need to dissuade “journalists and others” from “fabricating information to dissuade investors and business people.”⁸⁴ Okey Wali—Rivers’ attorney general at the time of the crisis—told Human Rights Watch that the state government had no figures or even rough estimates of civilian casualties because that responsibility rests with the police: “The police should have their figures,” he said.⁸⁵ A JTF spokesperson also would not offer any estimate as to the number of people killed during the July and August violence, including JTF casualties or the number of people killed or injured by JTF personnel.⁸⁶

The Human Rights Impact of the Joint Task Force Intervention in Rivers State

The Joint Task Force is a combined force of police, military, and State Security Service (SSS) personnel tasked with addressing security issues in the Niger Delta region. It is headquartered at Bori Camp, an army facility within Port Harcourt.

On August 12, the day after the destruction of the NNPC filling station in downtown Port Harcourt, the federal government ordered the JTF to deploy soldiers into the streets across Port Harcourt in an effort to halt the gang violence ravaging the city. Their deployment brought about a sudden lull in fighting as gang members went into hiding or left the city.⁸⁷ The uneasy standoff that ensued lasted only briefly, as JTF forces took the offensive just one day later.

The initial wave of JTF operations in August 2007 largely forced cult gangs underground or out of Port Harcourt, while later JTF operations occurred within several neighboring riverine communities. These operations included a high-profile but ultimately fruitless January 2008 raid on Ateke Tom's hometown of Okrika, a riverine community immediately south of Port Harcourt. The overall conduct of JTF forces has demonstrated a degree of restraint that has not been evident in past Niger Delta operations. However, specific operations resulted in numerous human rights abuses, including looting, arbitrary arrest, and extrajudicial killings. At the same time, the JTF has failed to apprehend any key cult leader, and many Port Harcourt residents fear that violence could return to crisis-level proportions when the JTF eventually withdraws its soldiers from the streets.

JTF Operations Following the August Crisis

The Assault on Marine Base

On the morning of August 12, JTF forces stormed the Marine Base neighborhood of Port Harcourt. Marine Base is a waterfront community not far from Government House and up until then had been a stronghold of Soboma George's Outlaws gang.

Soboma maintained a home in Marine Base, and local residents said he frequently passed the night there.⁸⁸

JTF forces engaged in sporadic gunfights with locally based gang members in Marine Base throughout the day on August 12.⁸⁹ Many Marine Base residents told Human Rights Watch that they locked themselves inside their homes from the first sounds of gunfire in the morning until the shooting subsided late that afternoon.⁹⁰ Many spent most of the day lying underneath beds or tables for fear of catching a stray bullet. As a result, few residents witnessed any of the fighting directly. “We went inside when we heard the guns,” one local shopkeeper told Human Rights Watch. “We only heard the sounds...it was a mini-war, those boys against the military.”⁹¹

One resident witnessed much of the fighting from the second-story windows of a building that overlooks Marine Base and confirmed that shooting continued throughout the day.⁹² According to several eyewitnesses and media reports, the military made use of an attack helicopter that on at least one occasion during the afternoon was seen hovering above the neighborhood firing rounds into the streets below it.⁹³ By late afternoon JTF forces had routed local gang members—most of whom fled into the nearby creeks—and established control over the area.

When the fighting ended late in the afternoon residents emerged from their homes to confront a scene of widespread destruction. Many residents pointed out to Human Rights Watch interior and exterior walls of their homes, which were pockmarked with bullet holes from August 12.⁹⁴ The Marine Base residence of Soboma George was partially gutted by fire and subsequently occupied by soldiers.

Remarkably, given the scale of the fighting, no local residents appeared to have been killed or wounded during the JTF attack.⁹⁵ Some residents told Human Rights Watch that in the evening they saw the bodies of several young men lying in the streets whom they believed were gang members involved in the fight.⁹⁶

The JTF's Failed Attack on Soboma George

On August 16 the JTF staged an attack on a small guest house along Reclamation Road just west of Port Harcourt's old commercial center where they believed George

was passing the afternoon.⁹⁷ JTF forces attacked the guest house, employing a helicopter for surveillance in support of military personnel attacking from the street. The apparent aim of the attack was to kill rather than to apprehend Soboma George, as JTF forces issued no warning, riddled the building with gunfire, and then set it ablaze.⁹⁸

Military spokespersons quickly announced that they believed Soboma George had been killed in the attack, but it was soon revealed that he had managed to escape unharmed. This was surprising, not only because of the violence of the assault but also because of the surrounding terrain, which should have made escape extremely difficult.⁹⁹ JTF forces pulled four charred, unidentified bodies from the smoldering wreckage of the guest house they had destroyed.¹⁰⁰ Those dead were never identified. Soboma has since been in contact with the press and his survival was later acknowledged by JTF and government officials.

JTF Efforts to Maintain Order in Port Harcourt

One day following the failed attack on Soboma George, the Rivers State government imposed an indefinite statewide curfew from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. JTF forces have also maintained a significant presence on the streets of Port Harcourt through checkpoints and patrols. This was broadly welcomed by residents of Port Harcourt, who longed for a return to normalcy.¹⁰¹ On August 18 then-Governor Celestine Omehia announced that soldiers would remain on the streets of the state capital for six months; this has since been extended indefinitely.¹⁰²

Military checkpoints have become less numerous and less strict over time, but armed soldiers and police remain a common sight on the streets of Port Harcourt.¹⁰³ The curfew was eventually pushed back to a 9 p.m. start, and was rescinded altogether by the state government on New Year's Eve 2007. Security has not been restored completely, however. The very night the curfew was lifted, armed men linked to Ateke Tom attacked Port Harcourt's best-known hotel, reportedly killing some 13 people.¹⁰⁴ Gangs have also continued to carry out kidnappings through the beginning of 2008.¹⁰⁵

Human Rights Abuses Committed by JTF Forces in Port Harcourt

JTF forces killed several residents of Port Harcourt in circumstances that do not appear to have offered any justification for the use of lethal force. Military personnel have also looted homes and arbitrarily detained people without charge—in some cases for the apparent purpose of extorting money in return for their release. In several cases JTF personnel beat people whom they had arbitrarily detained in the course of anti-gang operations that failed to detain any actual gang members.

In the opinion of the roughly 85 local activists, journalists, and ordinary residents of Port Harcourt interviewed by Human Rights Watch, the conduct of JTF forces has improved substantially over time since their initial deployment in August 2007.¹⁰⁶ Indeed most of the abuses reported to Human Rights Watch took place in the first weeks of the JTF's deployment. This appears to be partly because JTF commanders insisted on improved conduct and partly a consequence of the fact that JTF checkpoints became less numerous and strict after that initial period. As described below, many reported JTF abuses involved people passing through such checkpoints.

One military spokesperson acknowledged to Human Rights Watch that, “At first there were complaints of public molestation by soldiers,” but said that “we were directed to stop this, and it has stopped.”¹⁰⁷ Beyond that spokesperson's claims that “one or two” soldiers were disciplined for committing abuses against civilians, there have been no reported cases of any JTF personnel being investigated or held to account in any way for serious human rights abuses.¹⁰⁸

Unlawful Killings and Beatings

During the first weeks of the JTF intervention in Port Harcourt, military personnel set up checkpoints throughout the city to control the population's movement. Individuals passing through these checkpoints were usually required to raise their hands above their heads while passing through the area and were sometimes searched by soldiers. In a handful of cases, soldiers reportedly beat or even killed civilians attempting to negotiate these checkpoints.

In one August incident, soldiers reportedly shot and killed a man when he lowered his arms at a checkpoint to answer an incoming call on his mobile phone. Witnesses

said that no warning was offered before the soldiers opened fire.¹⁰⁹ In another August incident described to Human Rights Watch by an eyewitness, a man refused to raise his arms in the air while passing through a JTF checkpoint. Soldiers reportedly set upon and badly beat him in reprisal for his defiance, then stripped him naked on the street and forced him to submerge himself in an open gutter filled with refuse and dirty water.¹¹⁰

Several other cases reported to Human Rights Watch involved the use of lethal force by soldiers without evident justification. In one incident witnessed in mid-August 2007 by a prominent local human rights activist, soldiers reportedly emerged from a military vehicle at a traffic-choked intersection, dragged two young men from a car just in front of their own, and shot both of them dead in the street. The eyewitness told Human Rights Watch that he could not discern any justifiable reason for the killing. “The thing happened in split seconds,” he said. “They came down and dragged these boys from their car and opened fire. They died there. I don’t know why. [Maybe] they were chasing them from somewhere.”¹¹¹

In one case, JTF forces detained a gang member who was wounded during a firefight; he later died in custody. A JTF statement claimed that the detainee died while the military were transporting him to Okrika—a community without any adequate medical facilities—for “medical treatment.” The man had been arrested less than a kilometer from Port Harcourt’s largest hospital.

In general, there has not been adequate explanation of the circumstances under which individuals killed by JTF forces died. As one Port Harcourt-based journalist put it, “Whenever they [the JTF] kill someone they say he is a cultist. There is no way to know whether he really is or not.”¹¹² A JTF spokesperson interviewed by Human Rights Watch declined to provide even a rough estimate of the number of gang members killed by JTF personnel since August.¹¹³

Arbitrary Detention and Extortion

JTF officials acknowledge that especially during operations in August, the JTF detained several hundred people on suspicion of cult activity.¹¹⁴ However, they have never revealed the total number of those arrested.¹¹⁵ In many cases, arrests were

arbitrary and in some instances appear to have been made for the primary purpose of extorting cash bribes from those held. JTF officials conceded to Human Rights Watch that they have no legal authority to retain anyone in their custody, and since September official policy has been to require all detainees to be quickly turned over to police or SSS custody.¹¹⁶

Human Rights Watch interviewed several people who were detained and held by the JTF at Bori Camp without any apparent legal justification. Some said that they were released only after being forced to bribe JTF members for their freedom.¹¹⁷ One such case documented by Human Rights Watch involved two young men whom JTF forces detained in late August because they were employees of a car dealership where suspected cult members had gone to purchase cars. The two young men told Human Rights Watch that they were detained at Bori Camp, sharing a cell with several young men who had been arrested for violating curfew. The two men said that they were not questioned at all and were released without charge after 11 days in detention—but only after friends and family scraped together a cash bribe of ₦360,000 demanded by JTF personnel at Bori Camp.¹¹⁸

On September 1, JTF forces raided the town of Bodo in Rivers' Ogoni region with the stated intention of apprehending cult members and restoring law and order to the town. As discussed above (see text box: “A Gang Leader Denounces his Former Sponsor”), Bodo has long been plagued by bloody contests for supremacy between two cult gangs in the employ of rival local politicians.¹¹⁹ JTF forces failed to apprehend any local cult members—cult members told Human Rights Watch they were tipped off beforehand and left prior to the raid.

Failing to find any of the people they intended to arrest, JTF personnel committed abuses against ordinary residents. Soldiers arbitrarily detained 13 people; according to local residents and to cult members interviewed by Human Rights Watch, none of these 13 people was involved in cult activity or violence. As one frustrated resident said to Human Rights Watch, “Those they said they were looking for, they couldn't get any of them. So they were just harassing innocent people [and] even picked some innocent people and took them away.” Among those detained was the elder sister of one suspected cult member, who told Human Rights Watch that she was

publicly whipped by a JTF soldier, made to lie face down in the dirt, and then arrested. She was detained at the SSS facility in Port Harcourt for two weeks before being released without charge.¹²⁰ All of the other 12 detainees were set free without charge within two weeks of their arrest.

During the same operation JTF personnel also shot up and burned the residences of several alleged Deebam members. Human Rights Watch interviewed residents who said that soldiers had also entered their homes and ransacked them looking for cash, stealing whatever they found.¹²¹

Many of the residents who complained to Human Rights Watch about the raid said that they would have been supportive of a JTF operation if it had successfully targeted local cult members.¹²² As one man whose neighbor's home was looted by JTF personnel put it:

Myself, I even want them to come and search the houses. If they are coming and it is genuine, there is nothing bad with that. But the issue is whether or not they start harassing innocent people. The things they d[id] when they came is different from what they tell us—they start harassing innocent people and destroying their properties. That is not supposed to be their aim.¹²³

On the night of January 17, 2008, police carried out a raid in the violence-plagued Diobu neighborhood of Port Harcourt and arrested more than 200 people. The police officers involved appear to have had no clear idea whom they were seeking to arrest; civil society leaders and press accounts indicated that police arrested men and boys largely at random. None was charged with any criminal offense, but some of those arrested said they were forced to pay bribes to the police to secure their release from jail.¹²⁴

The JTF in Ogbogoro

The story of the JTF's intervention in Ogbogoro provides a clear illustration of how effective the JTF's presence has been in restoring security to many communities that had been plagued by violence. At the same time, Ogbogoro's example highlights the impossibility of ending the rampant criminality absent a political commitment on the part of all levels of government to tackle the underlying causes of the area's problems.

On September 7 (as described in "Gang Terror in Ogbogoro," above), Deebam cult members in Ogbogoro attacked a community meeting and murdered two prominent traditional rulers. The meeting had been called to endorse a decision to invite the JTF to come to Ogbogoro and confront the cultists.

JTF forces responded quickly but after cult members had already fled the town. The JTF has maintained a presence in Ogbogoro ever since, a development residents have eagerly welcomed. Local youth leaders say they have actively cooperated with the JTF in trying to locate and apprehend cultists in the surrounding areas and assisted in a late September JTF operation that resulted in the successful rescue of a British hostage from a nearby community in Etche Local Government Area.¹²⁵

In spite of the reprisal they suffered for earlier efforts to combat local cult activity, community and youth leaders interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they were proud of the stand they had taken. One local leader told Human Rights Watch that, "Other Niger Delta communities should be proactively involved and not just sit back and accept these problems. They should learn from our example."¹²⁶

The JTF presence has brought a tenuous peace to Ogbogoro. The primary concern expressed by many residents is that violence will return when the JTF removes its forces from Ogbogoro's streets.¹²⁷ None of the local leaders of Deebam cult has been apprehended, although community leaders say they have provided their names to the JTF and police. Several community leaders say they have received notes or phone text messages conveying threats of violence and death to be carried out when the JTF leaves and cultists are able to reenter the community.

All of the Ogbogoro residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they wanted to see the JTF remain in the community until the threat of further violence could be eliminated. One traditional ruler said, “We don’t want the military to leave us so soon. We don’t want you to hear that this community has been destabilized again...We want a substantial military presence here until the principal perpetrators of these crimes are caught.”¹²⁸

Looking Forward: Government Inaction and the Risk of Further Violence

In spite of serious blunders and abuses, since August the Joint Task Force has succeeded in restoring a fragile peace to the streets of Port Harcourt. That achievement already stands threatened, however—a limited wave of violence and kidnappings broke across Port Harcourt in the first three months of 2008, including the kidnapping of three young children.¹²⁹ Many local residents told Human Rights Watch that they were terrified of what will happen when JTF forces withdraw their presence on the streets.¹³⁰ As one local resident put it, “the JTF has restored sanity within the area. Before we were living with fear...[Now] we are sleeping freely with our two eyes closed.”¹³¹ But few had faith in the ability or willingness of the police and state government officials to prevent the gangs from returning to the streets. Even fewer had confidence the government would address the root causes of the violence.

Since at least 2003 (as discussed above in the “Background” chapter), high-ranking state and local government officials in Rivers State have been directly implicated in arming the very gangs the JTF is now tasked with combating. Rivers State police have consistently turned a blind eye not only to the criminal and politically motivated violence, but also to the political sponsorship of gang violence—a problem that has continued to the present. Ultimately, no effort to combat gang violence in Rivers State can succeed unless it holds to account the politicians behind those committing the crimes.

The Rivers State Government

Celestine Omehia became governor through the brazenly rigged April 2007 polls. He remained in office for only five months before Nigeria’s Supreme Court overturned his election in October 2007. While in power the Omehia administration did nothing to check rising violence in the state or to sever the links between government officials and criminal gangs that were established by his predecessor as governor, Peter Odili.¹³²

Human Rights Watch interviewed Okey Wali, then-attorney general under the Omehia government. Among its major tasks, the attorney general's office is responsible for pursuing criminal prosecutions against gang members in Rivers State. In October 2007 Wali acknowledged that no such prosecutions were underway or even planned.¹³³

Wali also claimed that he was powerless to build prosecutions against politicians who sponsored armed gangs unless the police presented him with all of the evidence needed to go to court. Asked why the state government had not urged the police to arrest Soboma George at any point after he escaped from prison in 2005, Wali responded, "I do not know the facts of what happened before we came [into office]." He also claimed that, "I do not have any records indicating that Soboma George was charged to court"—despite the fact that Soboma George was facing murder charges when he escaped from prison. Wali then added, "This is not the time to cry over spilt milk."¹³⁴

The Omehia administration included politicians with ties to cult gangs, sending a clear signal that those gangs and the politicians who sponsored them were an integral part of politics under its watch. Omehia's secretary to the state government (SSG), Gabriel Pidomson, was one of the chief sponsors of gangs involved in the devastation of Pidomson's home community of Bodo.¹³⁵ Pidomson had also been speaker of the Rivers State House of Assembly during the Odili government. As one resident of Bodo complained to Human Rights Watch, "The first person to bring gun here was Pidomson. And yet they have made him state house of assembly and then SSG."¹³⁶

The irony inherent in all of this was not lost on the victims of Rivers' post-election violence. The man whose wife, a nurse, was shot dead by gang members while she walked home from work one afternoon in early August (see above, chapter "The Human Rights Impact of Post-Election Gang Violence in Rivers State," subsection "August: Chaos Takes Hold"), complained bitterly,

The weapons they had, even the military man does not have that.
Who gave it to them? Government never wants to do anything

because they are involved. They are in power. They could stop it if they want to.¹³⁷

Sponsorship of Cult Violence in Bodo

Bodo is a town in the Ogoni region of Rivers State that has been the site of a long-running turf war between two rival politicians. Both politicians have employed cult gangs to wage that war in Bodo's streets, plunging the population of the town into a persistent state of insecurity and fear. Bodo's example illustrates not only the human consequences of cult violence, but the openness with which local politicians foment it.

The politicians at the heart of Bodo's problems are Kenneth Kobani, Rivers' commissioner of finance under the Odili administration, and Gabriel Pidomson, who served as a member of the Rivers State House of Assembly during the same period. Pidomson also served as secretary to the state government during Celestine Omehia's brief tenure as governor beginning in May 2007.

Pidomson and Kobani have each sought to become the dominant political force in Bodo and thereby secure an advantage in competing for lucrative political offices at the state level. Several years ago Pidomson began employing members of the Deewell cult group to break Kobani's local influence (it is widely alleged that Pidomson himself is a high-ranking member of the Vikings cult¹³⁸). Kobani responded by employing members of the Deebam cult group to retaliate in kind.¹³⁹

The result was a protracted and bloody struggle that claimed dozens of lives on both sides and led to serious crimes against local residents. Local residents were forced to live in a state of persistent insecurity and fear throughout much of 2006 and 2007.¹⁴⁰ As one local Deebam cultist who had been involved in the violence told Human Rights Watch, "Up until now there are times you still see corpses around in remote areas rotting from that time. There are some parents who do not even know their children are dead. They think they have just left the community."¹⁴¹

By the time of the April 2007 elections, Kobani through his Deebam proxies had largely wrested control of Bodo from Pidomson and driven the Deewell faction out of

town. This effectively spelled the end of open armed conflict in Bodo but also left Deebam cultists with the run of the town. Local residents interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that some Deebam members committed crimes including assault and robbery against local residents with complete impunity while the police did nothing to intervene or respond to their complaints.¹⁴² JTF forces raided Bodo in September 2007 in an attempt to apprehend local cult members, but the raid resulted in nothing beyond the infliction of further abuses on local people. That raid is discussed in more detail above.

Administration of Gov. Rotimi Amaechi

Current Rivers Governor Rotimi Amaechi was put into office by Nigeria's Supreme Court in October 2007. Amaechi had challenged the legality of the PDP primaries in Rivers State, arguing that he had won the contest and should have been on the ballot instead of Celestine Omehia as the party's gubernatorial candidate. The Supreme Court found in Amaechi's favor and, rather than order a new election, simply installed him into office.

There is ample reason for skepticism over the Amaechi administration's ability or willingness to address Rivers State's chronic problems of corruption, poor governance, and violence. Amaechi served in the Rivers State House of Assembly during the Odili administration and in that capacity was implicated in an investigation by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in a corruption scandal involving the alleged theft of some ₦100 billion.¹⁴³ This in fact was the primary reason advanced by PDP officials for keeping Amaechi off the ballot. One of Amaechi's first acts as governor was to announce that he would not conduct any inquiry into allegations of corruption against the Odili administration—effectively ruling out an essential component of any sufficient effort to tackle the root causes of violence in the state.¹⁴⁴

Amaechi's first months in office have nonetheless been marked by some positive—albeit limited—signs. Amaechi's government has indefinitely suspended, but not formally renounced, the Omehia government's disastrous plan to demolish 26 waterfront communities. That plan threatened to render tens of thousands of people

homeless without adequate compensation and without any convincing rationale. Also, Governor Amaechi has for the first time appointed a credible civil society representative to Rivers State's Electoral Commission, which will oversee the conduct of local government polls slated for March 29, 2008.¹⁴⁵ But PDP primaries in preparations for those polls were held in February 2008 and local observers reported that they were marred by widespread irregularities as well as acts of "thuggery and intimidation" by powerful politicians.¹⁴⁶ To its credit, the Electoral Commission ordered a rerun of many of the most flawed primary polls, but the rerun polls were reportedly marred by the same kinds of abuse. A report by local civil society groups lamented,

Unfortunately, Governor Chibuike Rotimi Amaechi's declaration when he assumed duties that the era of imposition of candidates and godfatherism in Rivers politics was over was [ignored] by the Governor's men during the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Councillorship primaries as they swiftly hijacked the entire process rendering those without godfathers helpless.¹⁴⁷

At this writing it remains to be seen whether the state government will address these problems.

The Nigerian Police

Two days prior to Rivers State's gubernatorial elections in April 2007, Human Rights Watch met with a local gang leader less than a block away from a police post in the Diobu area of Port Harcourt. Gesturing contemptuously at the officers standing around outside, he remarked, "You see that small police station? They have no influence over us. Their hands are tied."¹⁴⁸

While Rivers State government officials have actively nurtured the arming and growth of gangs in the state, the Nigerian police have made the proliferation of these groups possible by consistently failing to enforce the law. The police have made no significant effort to investigate, apprehend, or prosecute any prominent gang leader or any Rivers State government official involved in sponsoring gang violence. That failure, which has often left gangs free to prey upon communities throughout Rivers

State, is a gross neglect of the central responsibilities of the police force. The police have also failed to deal with other manifestations of rampant criminality in Rivers State, including oil bunkering, kidnappings, and electoral fraud by Rivers politicians.

Assistant Inspector General of Police Ogbonna Onovo confirmed to Human Rights Watch in October that the police had no plans to investigate former governor Peter Odili or any other Rivers politician for sponsorship of cult violence.¹⁴⁹ Asked to justify this inaction Onovo responded, “Ateke and Asari have never said, ‘It was so-so who armed me.’”¹⁵⁰ This would not excuse a failure to investigate even if it were true, but in fact Ateke Tom has repeatedly stated on the record that Odili employed him to help rig the 2003 elections by force. In April 2007, for example, Ateke told Human Rights Watch that in 2003, “Any place Odili sent me, I conquered for him. I conquered everywhere.”¹⁵¹

The police have also not made any attempt in recent years to arrest leading gang members. Soboma George and Ateke Tom, for example, have both moved about the state openly for much of the past four years, even though both were theoretically wanted by the police. Implausibly, the police claim that prior to the August JTF assault on his home they had been searching for Soboma George and other gang leaders for several years but were unable to locate any of them. Rivers State Commissioner of Police Felix Ogbaudu told Human Rights Watch in October 2007, “We [didn’t] know where they are. These are clever people.”¹⁵² As already noted, Soboma George, an escaped prisoner who faces charges of murder, had openly maintained a home in Marine Base, and some residents of Port Harcourt complained that Soboma was regularly seen playing soccer in public places and questioned why the police could not have arrested him there.¹⁵³

The Federal Government

The Rivers State government and the Nigerian police bear most of the direct responsibility for creating the conditions that have allowed violence to grow unchecked in Rivers State. But the irresponsibility and misconduct of both of those institutions is only possible because the federal government has done nothing to insist on adherence to, and enforcement of, the law. Rivers’ violence has its roots in politics, and the PDP at the national level has benefited from the successful efforts of

Rivers politicians to violently rig elections. President Umaru Yar'Adua came into office pledging dramatic action to halt violence in the Niger Delta, but these promises have not resulted in any concrete action to date.¹⁵⁴

Because Nigeria's police are under federal control, the federal government has the responsibility to ensure adequate oversight and guidance of police activities in Rivers State. However, there is no evidence that the federal government has exerted any pressure on the police to conduct investigations into the criminal links between violent gangs and the state's politicians.

Under both the Obasanjo and Yar'Adua federal governments, the national anti-corruption body, the EFCC, systematically failed to pursue criminal charges against influential members of the ruling party, including former governor Odili. In March 2008 Odili secured a controversial court injunction barring the EFCC from investigating or arresting him for any corruption-related offense; that ruling is being challenged in court.

The EFCC's arrest of powerful former Delta State Governor James Ibori on corruption charges in December 2007 seemed to signal a sharp and important departure from the trend toward leaving the most powerful politicians untouched. But weeks after Ibori's arrest the Yar'Adua government eviscerated the EFCC's credibility by sacking its executive chairman in apparent retaliation for its pursuit of high-profile politicians. Because of the motives that appeared to lie behind it, this move has largely destroyed the credibility of federal anti-corruption efforts. This will likely further embolden politicians in Rivers State and elsewhere who have used corruption as a mechanism to fund violence and subvert the democratic process.

In September 2007 President Yar'Adua announced that he would order an investigation into the links between Rivers State government officials and cult gangs.¹⁵⁵ However, the federal government has since made no mention of that promised investigation.

Conclusion

Scores of ordinary citizens of Rivers State were gunned down in the streets in July and August 2007 in violence that in large part has its roots in the criminal conduct of their politicians. The scenes witnessed in the streets during the peak of that bloodshed were shocking enough in and of themselves. But perhaps even more disturbing is the undeniable fact that such mayhem has become a routine part of politics in Rivers State, tacitly accepted by the federal government and Nigeria's police.

The JTF's intervention brought an end to the worst of Rivers State's post-election violence in August 2007. Since then JTF forces have prevented the situation from sliding backwards. But the JTF can do nothing more than keep a lid on Rivers' underlying problems.

President Umaru Yar'Adua's much-heralded promises of a comprehensive peace initiative for the Niger Delta—which would end the violence, integrate erstwhile gang members into legitimate economic activity within the state, and promote economic development—have thus far come to nothing. A December 2007 meeting meant to secure “peace” between various armed gangs and the government in Bayelsa State, immediately west of Rivers, was widely condemned as a crude and expensive farce and has led nowhere.¹⁵⁶ Meanwhile the federal government has done nothing to help end the theft and squandering of resources that are more than adequate to begin addressing the socioeconomic causes of violence in the Niger Delta, or to hold politicians to account for funneling those resources into violence.

The first steps are obvious but none of them has been taken: The federal government and the police should launch a wide-ranging investigation into the links between armed gangs and politicians in Rivers State in order to hold those responsible to account, including through criminal prosecutions. The police and JTF should redouble efforts to apprehend and prosecute Soboma George, Ateke Tom, and other leading gang members.

Federal authorities should also display a greater commitment to ending the rampant corruption that has fueled the arming and growth of criminal gangs in Rivers State; this should begin with a full criminal investigation into the eight-year tenure of former governor Peter Odili. The EFCC has already compiled significant documentation against him but the case has not moved forward despite the private claims of EFCC officials that ample evidence has already been amassed.¹⁵⁷ These steps would help signal an end to the impunity the authors of the crimes documented in this report have come to rely on and take for granted.

Unless these steps are taken urgently, the result will be a continuation of the status quo. The residents of Rivers State will go on living in poverty while seeing their state's massive wealth channeled into violence that has already shattered too many lives. More hopefully, serious attempts to improve the quality of governance and bring an end to the rampant criminal activity fueled by many Rivers politicians today could begin to reverse that cruel paradox and transform the future of Rivers State.

Annex: Partial Overview of Cults, Gangs, and “Militant Groups” in Rivers State

The following are brief and highly generalized descriptions of the armed groups—gangs, cults, and “militant groups”—whose activities figure most prominently in the events described in this report. More detailed histories and analyses of some of these groups are available elsewhere.¹⁵⁸ This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue: A Rivers State government law banning the groups includes a list of more than 100 separate cult groups active in the state (the law has never been seriously enforced).

The information presented here is based on interviews with current and former gang members, civil society activists, and individuals who have carried out extensive research into the origin, structure, and activities of many of the cult organizations in Rivers State.

Supreme Vikings Confraternity (or “Vikings”)

The Supreme Vikings Confraternity was reportedly founded at the University of Port Harcourt in 1984. The Vikings have since grown to nationwide prominence, with members on campuses scattered throughout southern Nigeria. Vikings members have been implicated in numerous acts of violence, both politically sponsored and purely criminal, in Rivers State and beyond. In Rivers State, Vikings members have reportedly won seats in the State House of Assembly in such numbers that some Port Harcourt residents jokingly refer to the Assembly as “Viking House.”

Icelanders/Niger Delta Vigilante

The Icelanders was formed as a “street wing” of the **Vikings** group—essentially a vehicle to enhance that group’s armed strength by recruiting members off-campus (membership in the Vikings and many other cult groups is only open to students on campuses where the groups operate). Former gang members and civil society activists allege that the group was formed at the initiative of former Federal Minister of Transportation **Abiye Sekibo**, a powerful member of the PDP and a native of Rivers State.

In the run-up to the 2003 elections in Rivers, the **Icelanders** were used to ensure a PDP victory in Okrika local government. Okrika had been controlled by the opposition All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP) since 1999. The Icelanders, led by Ateke Tom, successfully drove the ANPP-affiliated **Bush Boys** out of Okrika and ensured a PDP victory in the local government. Ateke's group grew in numbers and prominence over the coming years and took on the name **Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV)** in 2003.

The Icelanders are one of Rivers State's most powerful and violent gangs and have been implicated in numerous assaults, murders and, other crimes. The Icelanders are also involved in oil bunkering and providing "security" to oil bunkering operations run by local politicians. Two of the individuals most responsible for the violence described in this report are affiliated with different factions of the Icelanders: **Ateke Tom** was one of the founders of the group, and **Soboma George** also began his criminal career as a member of the group.

Deewell

Like the **Icelanders**, Deewell was founded by the **Vikings** as a "street" wing of the cult. Deewell's members are mainly unemployed youth with no university education who engage in various forms of violent and petty crime. Deewell is also called upon by prominent members of its parent **Vikings** organization to engage in violent turf wars on their behalf. Most notably, Deewell has been involved in several bloody conflicts with **Deebam**, an off-campus affiliate of the **Klansmen** cult.

Deebam

Deebam is the street wing of the campus-based **Klansmen Konfraternity**¹⁵⁹ and is one of the most effectively organized and most violent cult gangs in Rivers State. Deebam has been responsible for numerous kidnappings of expatriate oil workers and wealthy Nigerians and engaged in several bloody turf wars with rival groups in different parts of Rivers State.¹⁶⁰

Deebam differs from the street wings of other cult groups in that it is largely autonomous from its parent Klansmen cult. Its members have often been hired by sponsors who are not themselves members of the Klansmen. For example, Deebam

has been at the front lines of a long-running turf war in the Rivers State town of Bodo as the proxy militia of former state Commissioner of Finance **Kenneth Kobani**. Kobani himself is reportedly not a member of the Klansmen or any other cult, but has had no trouble securing the services of Deebam in a largely successful effort to drive his political rival's **Deewell** fighters from Bodo.

The late leader of the **Deebam** group, **Prince Igodo**, was killed in a May 2007 shootout with members of Soboma George's **Outlaws** gang. Igodo was reportedly killed because he was believed responsible for the kidnapping for ransom of the mother of former governor **Celestine Omehia**, and had threatened to violently disrupt Omehia's inauguration as governor.

Outlaws

The Outlaws gang was founded by **Soboma George** in 2005.¹⁶¹ Soboma had previously been a subordinate of **Ateke Tom** and a member of the **Icelanders** but fell out with Ateke following Soboma's incarceration on charges of murder in 2005.¹⁶² He founded the Outlaws either while in prison or immediately after staging a successful jailbreak in 2005.

Soboma and his Outlaws gang, along with close ally **Prince Fara** of the **Niger Delta Strike Force**, became an increasingly favored recipient of patronage doled out by Rivers politicians and had attained a position of clear dominance over other groups by the time of the April 2007 elections. Jealousy on the part of other groups who felt excluded from such patronage—especially **Ateke Tom**—was the primary cause of the bloody inter-cult fighting described in this report.

Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF)

During the run-up to the 2003 elections, **Asari Dukobo** was recruited by PDP officials to organize electoral violence and ensure the successful rigging of the polls. Shortly after the elections, Asari broke with his former sponsors and organized his fighters under the NDPVF banner. The NDPVF fundamentally transformed the dynamics of conflict in the Niger Delta with its adoption of overtly political rhetoric, identifying itself in opposition to the perceived marginalization and neglect of the Niger Delta

and framing its activities in terms of strident political demands. In this it was the precursor to the **Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)**.

The NDPVF was badly weakened following Asari's arrest on charges of treason in 2005 but is still in existence and strong in some parts of Rivers State. Many NDPVF members are also cult members but in some communities, such as Ogbogoro, NDPVF members have tried to combat the violence carried out by cult groups through vigilante activities.

Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)

The phenomenon of armed Niger Delta "militancy" essentially began with Asari Dukobo of the NDPVF and culminated in the formation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in early 2006. MEND has cast itself as the militant champion of the "Niger Delta cause," demanding greater local control of oil resources along with other concessions and carrying out a series of attacks on government installations.

MEND's membership is an amalgam of existing armed groups that have continued to operate independently in addition to carrying out and supporting periodic politically motivated activities under the banner of MEND. **Soboma George** of the **Outlaws**, for example, has been accepted as a prominent MEND "commander" in Rivers State.

MEND started the wave of kidnappings targeting expatriate oil workers that has swept across the region. While MEND's first kidnappings were in large measure intended as a political statement, kidnapping has since grown into a kind of cottage industry carried out by a diverse array of groups and primarily for profit.

In 2007 MEND suffered from increasing internal disarray, splitting into eastern and western factions and largely ceasing to carry out effective strikes or function coherently as a group. Some current and former gang members ascribe these problems to disagreements over the allocation of money between several different MEND commanders. In October 2007 the group suffered a further blow when **Henry Okah**, one of its key spokespeople and arms suppliers, was arrested by Angolan authorities on charges of arms trafficking. Okah's faction of MEND has since

threatened further attacks if he is not treated fairly by the Nigerian federal government.

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