

## Media Representation of Nigeria's Joint Military Task Force in the Niger Delta Crisis

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### Abstract

*The questions of identity, oil exploration and development of social infrastructure resulted in serious security challenges in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Security problems worsened with the proliferation of ethnic militia groups known in the media as 'militants,' 'hoodlums,' 'terrorists,' 'thieves,' etc. In the last five years, armed resistance further degenerated into serious violence, hostage taking and bombing of oil pipelines in the Niger Delta. The Nigerian government responded by deploying military troops to the region to arrest the escalating crisis. The Federal Government troops known as the 'Joint Military Task Force' or 'Operation Restore Hope' was primarily assigned to protect oil installations and restore peace in the region, however the Task Force appeared to go an extra mile, which resulted in indiscriminate killings of the 'militants' and civilians including women and children and destruction of property worth millions of Naira in the Niger Delta. This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the role of the media in manipulating public opinion and people's perception of the roles of the Joint Military Task Force in the Niger Delta crisis.*

**Keywords:** discourse, media, representation, militias, Niger Delta, JMTF, crisis, Federal Government

### 1. Introduction

Representation in the media presupposes that media texts constitute points of views and value judgements about social events, situations and relationships. Hence, representation comprises versions of social reality that mirror the position and purpose of the people that produce them; this is usually reflected in the choices that are made about what is foregrounded or left in the background, included or excluded, made explicit or left implicit in the text (Fairclough, 1995a, van Dijk, 1991). According to Fairclough, analysis of representation would account for structures of propositions and how these reflect ideology and relations of power. The writer's choice of one word over other available sets of options is always significant especially because of its power to shape perceptions. According to Hodge and Kress (1993) choices made in specific contexts could be a good guide to how social forces can influence the text. Similarly, Fairclough (1995b) argues that formal choices constitute choices of meaning, which reveal how media language for example might work ideologically.

Ideological work of media language includes how individuals or groups, identities and relations are represented. Hence, particular construction of social identities would define how their actions are to be judged or evaluated. The objectives of this study are to (i) examine the recurrent themes in the reports about Nigeria's Niger Delta crisis in the representation of Nigeria's Joint Military Task Force (JMTF) (ii) examine ideologies underlying these themes and how they are legitimized (iii) analyze how the reports characterized the actors, their actions and the events that make up the conflicts and (iv) examine how agency is attributed for the actors and events represented in the reports. A similar approach has been adopted by Wenden (2005) in the study of 'the politics of representation: a critical discourse analysis of an Aljazeera special report' of the Israeli and Palestinian crisis.

### 2. Representation and Ideology in the Media

As pointed out above, particular representations of individuals or groups in the media are based on underlying ideological perceptions. In other words, ideological work of media language includes how individuals or groups, identities and relations are represented. Traditional views of ideology associate it with system of ideas and values, class, groups and institutions, often associated with group interests, conflicts and struggle (van Dijk, 1998). Many modern approaches to the study of ideology in discourse and social representations identify it with language use in order to account for how ideologies are expressed and reproduced in society. Some particular representations in the press may conceal truths that need to be told and may legitimize particular negative labeling or identity in the interest of certain people or government (see Chiluya 2011c). According to van Dijk (2005) ideologies may be used to legitimize or oppose power and dominance or symbolize social problems and contradictions. Representation or meaning associated with certain people can link them with particular patterns of behaviour and attitudes e.g. violence, robbery, prostitution etc.

For example Baker and McEnery (2005) and Baker (2006) show that refugees and asylum seekers in UK papers are generally constructed as a natural disaster, problematic, nuisances and as criminals. It is quite easy therefore to discern racism, intolerance and prejudice in discourse whether of the press, politics or religion. Critical analysis of discourse involves finding patterns in language use that categories and position people with certain roles and ways of thinking (Matheson, 2005). Ideologies according to van Dijk are mediated by mental models that are used in forming personal opinions about individuals or groups. These mental models represent what people think or perhaps know about others and facilitate in organizing some specific group attitudes. These attitudes and personal opinions represented in mental models are finally expressed in texts or discourse (van Dijk, 2005). The cognitive structure of ideologies thus, organizing and controlling group attitudes, often leads to positive self construction and negative representation of others (van Dijk, 2005).

### **3. An overview of the Niger Delta Crisis**

The identity of the Niger Delta (ND) people as the 'minority' ethnic group with its huge implications for socio-economic development and political power rights is believed to be a core issue in the ND crisis. Another main cause of hostility is the struggle for resource control accruing to the region that accounts for over 95% of national income. The agitation for self-determination and the calls for exclusive political space have lasted for over 50 years. Oil was discovered in large quantities in the ND in the late 50's and since the 70's over 80% of Nigeria's oil revenue and export earnings has been produced in the land. With the collapse of agriculture as a foreign exchange earner, oil is today the mainstay of Nigeria's economy contributing over 46.8% GDP in 1992, and accounting for about 96.2% of total export earnings since 1996 (Omotola, 2006). The increase in oil revenue in the early 70's coincided with increased centralization of political power in Nigeria. Before 1967, the regional governments exercised considerable executive powers; however, the creation of twelve states by the military government amplified the powers of the central government. This had a huge consequence with regard to the oil industry as it signaled the systematic alienation of the local people from decision making. The Petroleum Act of 1969 transferred all oil revenue to the military government which was expected to disburse the revenue to the various states.

It was then hoped that the creation of Rivers state and the then South Eastern state which partly met their demand for self determination would guarantee a significant share of control of oil revenue, but the concentration of power and resources in the Federal Government (FG) through military decrees further alienated the host oil communities (Obi, 2001). Omoweh (2006:31) argues that the case of the ND is not just an agitation for the rights of the people to natural resources but the rights to participate in the decision-making process on the exploitation and production and export of the resources, the right to know the income accruing from the production of the resources and how it is spent on development projects based on the needs of the people.' Therefore, the direct placing of oil revenue in the hands of the FG dominated by the power-elite from the ethnic majority groups leaving the environmental consequences of oil production to the ethnic minorities was perceived as blatant injustice.

Environmental degradation appears to be the most devastating effect of oil exploration in the Delta region. The spates of oil spills have almost totally destroyed fishing and farming which are the people's main sources of livelihood. About 3,000 oil spill incidents were reported by oil companies operating in Nigeria in recent years; this represents over two million barrels of oil spilled into the country's terrestrial, coastal and offshore marine environment (Agbu, 2005, Omotola, 2006). A World Bank report also reveals that almost 300 oil spills were recorded per year between 1991 and 1993 in the Delta and River states alone, (World Bank, 1995). According to a recent report by CNN (GPS), with 300 spills yearly, about 550 million gallons of oil have been spilled in the ND in the last 50 years. This is far more than the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, which Shell BP is committed to cleaning and pledging about \$50 million as compensation to those affected by the oil spills. In the Delta region however, no one is apparently held responsible or held accountable for cleaning the area. Thus, oil spills and gas flaring have been a recurrent problem with serious devastating effects. Mild agitations in form of demonstrations, media protests and legal tussles appeared to be handled with lethargy by successive governments and multi-national oil companies operating in the region. It is the destruction of the land and fishing waters, health hazards caused by constant oil spills and gas flaring and the prevalence of poverty and underdevelopment in the region that are today known as the 'Niger Delta crisis.'

### **3. The Rise of Ethnic Militias in the ND**

The demands for fairness to the ND people was first articulated by an organized oil right group known as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) led by the social activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged in 1995 by the military administration along with eight other activists. The Mosop's action which was the first attempt to radicalize the ND struggle was hinged on the following demands: (1) social justice for the ethnic minorities (2) equity in power-sharing in Nigeria

(3) compensation for environmental devastation and the restoration of the environment (4) payment of economic rents to oil producing areas and (5) human dignity and self-realization. (Obi, 2001). Hence, the rise and spread of militancy activities in the region are fundamentally due to growing resistance against economic hardship, state authoritarianism and environment degradation. This fuelled the emergence of over twenty armed resistance groups in the ND. At the forefront of these radical movements were the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND); the All Ijaw Youth Conference; the Egbesu Boys of Africa; the pan-Niger Delta Youth Movement (the Chikoko); the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF); Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities etc. (Obi, 2001; Omotola, 2006). This massive resurgence of ethnic militia heightened arms proliferation and worsened the spates of violence, most of which were targeted at the oil companies operating in the region – through seizure of oil wells, kidnapping and hostage taking of oil workers.

#### **4. The Joint Military Task Force**

The Joint Military Task Force (JMTF), also known as ‘Operation Restore Hope’ comprises military personnel and combatant troops drawn from the Nigerian Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Police and the State Security Service (SSS) who were deployed to the ND in May, 2009. They were originally charged by the Nigerian government to protect oil installations and waterways in the Delta region following recurrent reports of vandalisation of oil facilities in the area by ethnic youth activists. However, military attacks carried out by the JMTF on the militia groups were said to result in indiscriminate killing of the insurgents and civilians and destruction of property in the ND worth millions of Naira. One of the divisions of the JMTF was referred to as ‘Operation Flush Out.’ The history of military occupation of the oil communities began in 1994, which according to Okonta & Douglas (2003), marked out the ND as the only part of Nigeria where a special military occupation force took over the lives of the people, ‘killing, maiming, and raping thousands’ (p. iii). In November 1999 the FG also moved some army battalions from Warri in Delta State and Elele in Rivers State into Bayelsa State (Ransome-Kuti, 1999). Some days before, seven policemen had been killed in a clash with youths in the Odi area of Bayelsa state and as Ransome-Kuti (1999) pointed out, rather than send security operatives to investigate the incident, identify and arrest the perpetrators of the killings, the government sent troops and weapons. After two days of ‘criminal bombardment’ of Odi, all male youths in the town and its environs were killed while buildings were set on fire. This action of the government which attracted both national and international outcry marked the beginning of formal organized military activities (a form of JMTF) in the ND.

#### **5. Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of critical social research that aims at contributing to addressing the social ‘wrongs’ of the day such as injustice, inequality, domination, lack of freedom etc, by analysing their sources, and causes, resistance to them and possibilities of overcoming them (Fairclough, 2009:163). In other words, a critical analysis is oriented towards social problems particularly with the aim of finding solutions to them. This approach often exposes subtle methods used by those who exercise power (political, economic or money power, religious, media, knowledge, ethnic etc) to oppress others. CDA therefore would involve the analysis of ‘the socio-cultural practice’ of the text or the socio-cultural goings-on which the communicative event is part of’ (Fairclough, 1995a). Applying this approach to media discourse will then explain the process in which social practices influence news production and how media texts in turn help influence society by shaping the opinions and views of those that read them (Fairclough, 1989). The description of the text will include identifying the formal features of the text either of vocabulary or grammar available in the discourse type, (e.g. news) which the text draws upon and what other choices in the discourse type that could have been used instead.

For example, the use of agency, metaphor, passivization, nominalization etc indicates that choices have been made by the writer to present a viewpoint aimed at either to promote or undermine someone or an ideology or a belief etc. According to van Dijk, a critical discourse analyst takes an explicit position, and thus wants to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality...thus, crucial for CDA is the explicit awareness of their role in society (van Dijk, 2001:1). With the development of CDA (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; 2000; van Dijk 1991; 1995; 2000, Wodak, 1999) more insights have been gained on the role of popular mass media in the construction and maintenance of power relations and ideology in discourse (Fairclough, 1995), racism (van Dijk, 1991; 2000; Krishnamurthy 1996); injustice and social abuse (Dragana Polovina-Vukovic, 2004). Van Dijk (1991; 2000) shows that ‘new racism’ – a subtle form of discrimination among the ‘Extreme Right’ is prevalent in Europe and North America and that the press has contributed significantly to its increasing practice. Similarly Polovina-Vukovic (2004) applying CDA in ‘the representation of social actors in the *Globe* and *Mail* during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia,’ argues that different ethnic groups were largely portrayed either as ‘villains’

or 'victims' and that such portrayal contributed to Western actions in the Balkans and Western acceptance or rejection of refugees.

## 5. *The Corpus*

The corpus for this study comprises thirty (30) news reports by six Nigerian national daily newspapers namely *The Guardian*, *Nigerian Compass*, *The Vanguard*, *PM news*, *ThisDay* and *Daily Sun*. News samples (or texts) are mainly online downloads made up of reports on the ND crisis particularly the activities of the JMTF in the region between 2007 and 2009. The newspapers were purposively selected for this study. However, they are among the top national newspapers in Nigeria with the widest distribution networks in the country.

## 6. *Thematic Representations of the ND Crisis*

In the reports and representations of the activities of the JMTF in the crisis, two themes were found to be recurrent in all the newspapers. They are (i) violence and war (ii) kidnappings and abductions. In the analysis I have attempted to show how these themes are constantly a central focus in the reports while the main issues of underdevelopment were relegated to the background. This in my view was in order to legitimize the deployment of the troops in ND and justify the killings of not only the 'militants' but also civilians. The underlying ideology of the themes is also highlighted.

### 6.1 *Violence and War*

In the texts below there is general image of violence and war that the reader gets in all the excerpts. **Text 1** for example, gives an actual number of persons that were killed during the 'theatre of war' between the JMTF and 'a suspected gang of militants' in Port Harcourt. While it is true that the activities of the JMTF in the ND met stiff resistance from the insurgents resulting in various forms of violence, it is still questionable if there was a 'war' in Nigeria, at least not that the international community is aware of. Yet the 'booms' of guns and 'shrill cries' (Text 1), the 'bloodbath,' (Text 2), 'crackdown,' and 'fierce battle', (Text 3), 'ongoing hostility,' (Text 4), and 'gun battle,' (Text 5) evoke the image of war between two warring nations.

**Text 1.** 32 feared killed as soldiers, gang clash in Rivers. Once again, the streets of Port Harcourt, Rivers State capital, turned a theatre of war yesterday. Guns boomed and the shrill cries of wounded persons sent chills down the bones of residents, many of whom were trapped indoors. The gun duel was, however, not between two rival gangs, but between a combined team of the Army, and the Air Force on the one hand, and a suspected gang of militants on the other (*The Guardian*, August 17, 2007).

**Text 2.** Bloodbath in Niger Delta .Nine soldiers, three militants killed in 'unprovoked' attack .HEAVILY-ARMED militants yesterday attacked the facilities of Italian Oil Firm, Agip, in Southern Ijaw Council Area in Bayelsa State. As usual, they left a trail of blood. Nine soldiers of the Joint Task Force (JTF) were killed...The taskforce said that the attack was "a desperate scheming" by the militants to gain relevance in the Niger Delta. ..He said that the attack, coordinated by MEND, met stiff resistance following a serious exchange of gun fire between the JTF troops and the militants. "In the battle, three militants were confirmed killed and four injured militants captured and no damage to the oil facilities" (*Nigerian Compass*, December 27, 2008)

**Text 3.** N'Delta: FG Orders Crackdown on Militants. MEND claims responsibility for death of naval personnel. The stage is now set for a fierce battle between the men of the Nigerian Armed Forces and militants who killed three naval ratings on Saturday as hundreds of troops were yesterday deployed to Nembe creek in Bayelsa State where the killing took place. This is coming as the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) has claimed responsibility for the killing of the Nigerian navy personnel Sunday evening at Nembe Creek saying they used it to commemorate the fifth month of incarceration of their leader Henry Okah (*This Day*, May 2, 2008)

**Text 4.** 1, 500 feared dead in Delta turmoil •5,000 refugees evacuated as JTF, MEND clash THE on-going hostility between the Joint Task Force (JTF) codenamed Operation Restore Hope and the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) is taking its... toll. At least, 5000 residents of Gbaramatu, a swampy community, one of the battle fronts in the creeks of Delta State, were yesterday evacuated by the management of the Ogbe-Ijoh Local Government... (*Nigerian Compass*, May 18, 2009)

**Text 5.** Army, Militants in Gun Battle. Nigerian security forces repelled an attack by gunmen, on an Exxon Mobil housing compound in Eket, Akwa Ibom state, security sources said, today. The attack on the U.S. energy giant's compound in Eket, where security measures were reinforced in December, following a rise in violence in Akwa Ibom state, occurred around 10 p.m., on Tuesday, the sources said... (*PM News*, February 2, 2009)

Not only is the ND crisis constructed in terms of a war situation, there are vivid descriptions of fighting between the JMTF and the insurgents, which suggests that the primary mission of the JMTF was either ignored or that JMTF had a secret agenda to engage the insurgents in face to face military combat. The themes of violence and war in the ND simply suggests an ideological construction of an environment where law and order had broken down, which only necessitated the FG military intervention. In **Text 3** for example, an additional ‘hundred of troops’ was deployed to Bayelsa state by the JMTF, which is typical of a war situation. This study argues that the characterization of the ND crisis in terms of a guerilla war is an outright exaggeration, which only tended to justify the military intervention and the killing of ‘militants.’ The activities of the JMTF had been widely criticized locally and internationally considering the level human casualty and destruction of property in the ND. In **Text 5**, the activities of the JMTF resulted in the evacuation of about 5,000 residents of the local communities. As the texts clearly shows, the JMTF indeed engaged the insurgents in a form of battle, which violated their primary assignment in the area. On the one hand, the press appears to present a factual account of the crisis in the ND, but as we shall see further in the analysis, there is an implicit ideological construction of a war situation, in order to portray the JMTF on a positive legitimate national assignment. According to Wogu (2010) for example, the Nigerian government are empowered by the Nigerian constitution to invite the military to suppress any form of insurrection and restore order when called upon to do so. And since the activities of the ‘militants’ were viewed by the FG as an act of insurrection or waging some kind of war against the country, any means of force applied by the JMTF to quell the rebellion was then justified.

## 6.2 Kidnapping and Abduction

Another important thematic representation of the ND crisis is an ideological construction of the crisis in terms of kidnapping and abduction. Stories of militancy and kidnapping became so overwhelming that the legitimate demands of the natives for infrastructural development was systematically downplayed. The ND almost became synonymous with kidnapping and reports regarding release of abducted persons became the news. This study argues that the representation of the crisis in terms of the activities of a few persons who engaged in wrongful kidnapping of oil workers is ideological. As pointed out earlier, certain representations or negative labels have the tendency to establish some negative cultural norms around a group of people. In this case, I argue that the frequent representation of the ethnic minorities in the ND as mere war against kidnapers is a mere evaluative judgement, and not factual.

**Text 6.** Soldiers raid militants' hide-out, free two expatriates. Youths blow up ALSCON staff quarters; abduct six foreigners. One suspected militant was feared killed and two expatriates freed as government forces yesterday raided a hide-out believed to belong to a band of activist Niger Delta youths. Two expatriates, both Filipino sailors, were freed in the face-off. Before the raid, a group of militants had blown up the residential quarters of the Aluminum Smelter Company of Nigeria (ALSON) in Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State and abducted six of the firm's foreign workers. Meanwhile, the Rivers State Police Commissioner, Mr. Felix Ogbaudu has said that the whereabouts of about 14 expatriates including women and children kidnapped in the state last Friday and Saturday remain unknown...The latest abduction brings to 30 the number of foreigners being held by different armed groups in the Niger Delta. The Rivers State Police chief told The Guardian yesterday that no group has claimed responsibility for the abduction... He gave the assurance that the police and other relevant security agencies in the state would not relent in their bid to search for and secure the release of the foreigners. (*The Guardian*, June 4, 2007).

**Text 7.** Kidnappers attack Julius Berger boat, abduct six. Vanguard gathered that the kidnappers who attacked the Julius Berger vessel released one of the crew members to discuss the N20 million with his employers and threatened to kill the rest and blow up the vessel and tugboats, if they were ignored. Events leading to the abduction, it was learnt, showed that the kidnappers who were sailing in three fast boats swooped on the vessel, firing into the air, causing fear among the crew (*The Vanguard*, July 6, 2009).

**Text 8.** Rivers Police Storm Kidnappers' Forest, Free Scottish Man, 2-Year Old Baby (260409). In a rare display of professional intelligence and uncommon determination, the police in Rivers State have rescued a Scottish national kidnapped in Port Harcourt, 21 days ago. The cops stormed a forest at Ogbogoro, in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, near Port Harcourt, to rescue the victim. Also in a separate but similar incident, a two-year old baby, Miss Angela Ogwala, who was kidnapped some days ago, has also been rescued from her abductors at a village at Ogoni. (*PM News*, April 26, 2009)

In the above texts, the headlines appear in the first lines. Themes of news texts are often reflected in the headlines, which hold a strategic position in terms of structural and cognitive functions of the entire news.

In **Texts 6-8** for examples, the headlines are strategically structured to convey direct image and theme of kidnapping. The leads that follow further expand this idea highlighting what actions the JMTF had taken or was in the process of taking to arrest the culprits. The information expressed in the headline is used by the reader in the process interpreting the news to construct the overall meaning of the text. The theme and the headline information are used to activate the relevant knowledge in the memory of the reader in order to understand and evaluate the news report (van Dijk, 1991). Thus, the word 'kidnap' or 'abduct' used in the headline, which also introduces the theme of the report quickly activates the relevant general knowledge about kidnapping particularly in the ND, which the reader already has and this helps to mould the reader's perception of the kidnapper and the entire ND region. Without prejudice to any group or section of the Nigerian society, kidnapping had been a heinous anti-social practice which is not peculiar to the ND crisis although it became popularized with the rebellion in the ND. Up till the present time, kidnapping of people for no specific reasons has been prevalent in the southeastern Nigeria. In the data samples above, the activities of the JMTF are positively represented as saviours, following the 'we' positive representation and 'them' (the rebels) negative construction.

For instance, in **Text 6**, soldiers are said to raid militants' hideouts and free two expatriates; this contrasts with the negative activities of the youth activists who blew up some staff quarters and abducted six foreigners. Hence, one suspected militant killed in the process was a welcome development. Notice that the agent of the killing is concealed in the sentence even though it was obvious that he was killed by the soldiers. In **Text 7**, the kidnappers, who were the performing agents of the attack were said to abduct six persons. However, in **Text 8**, the JMTF are characterized as displaying 'a rare professional intelligence and uncommon determination' as they rescued an abducted Scottish national and a two-year old child. Thus, the publicity of this uncommon display of military wizardry could have endeared the JMTF to the heart of the Nigerian people and help cover up the atrocities they (the JMTF) were accused of. Significantly, kidnapping was vehemently condemned by the ND youth activists, who frequently dissociated themselves from the kidnappers often described as 'non-genuine' ND freedom fighters.

Kidnapping was viewed as almost missing the original purpose of the activism, which was said to have targeted at attracting the attention of the international community and to push for the release of the detained 'militant' leaders (first Asari Dokubo and later Henry Okah). According to reports, about 70 foreigners mostly oil workers were kidnapped in 2006, 167 in 2007, 81 in 2008 and 127 as at January, 2009 (*Newswatch*, September 29, 2009) most of whom were released after huge ransoms were paid. But the point is that the overwhelming positive representation of the JMTF in the media as national heroes and the negative representation of the crisis as a war against kidnapping and abduction further popularized the government forces warring against its own people and killing civilians. The Nigerian law does not prescribe a death sentence for kidnapping but the JMTF did kill both kidnappers and civilians in the fight against the insurgents.

### **7. Characterization of the Actors and their Actions**

Words or expression in a text are often carefully chosen from a wide range of available options to construct and characterize certain people, social relations or events in a particular way to reinforce and legitimize the ideology that have been communicated in the themes of the discourse (van Dijk, 1999, Wenden, 2005). As already highlighted in the analysis above, the Nigerian press attempted to represent positively the activities of the JMTF despite their brutality and illegal hurting of the civilian population. I argued that the press exaggerated the ND 'lawless' environment in order to justify military attacks on the natives instead of the assumed assignment of securing oil installations and restoring peace in the region. In this section, I examine some general characterization of the JMTF and their actions in relation to the insurgents. In the texts below, samples of news reports about the identity and activities of the JMTF are reproduced showing that the Nigerian press characterized the JMTF within the ideological framework that excused the brutality of the JMTF. In the texts, I have also reproduced some quoted items (i.e. showing the voices of certain government and military people), which in a way form the opinion or represent the position of the newspapers themselves.

**Text 9.** Musa explained that without the presence of the JTF in Rivers State for instance, there would be a complete breakdown of law and order. Describing the JTF which comprises the Army, Navy, State Security Services (SSS), Air Force and the Police as the "pillar of peace in the Niger Delta", he said that this is what the militants do not want. He accused MEND of doing everything possible to blackmail the military institution which now serves as an embankment against its illicit activities and that of other militant groups in the Niger Delta. (*The Guardian*, October 1, 2007).

**Text 10.** He commended the JTF for attempting to sanitise the place and urged members to support the Executive in the efforts to rid the Niger Delta of criminal elements, stressing that "militancy in the

Niger Delta today is a criminal issue, and now that the military is alert to its responsibilities, it must be supported by the parliament." (*The Guardian*, May 22, 2009)

**Text 11.** AGAINST the backdrop of the latest attacks by unrepentant militants who claimed to be members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, last weekend, the Defence Minister and Chairman of the Federal Government's Amnesty Committee, Major-General Godwin Abbe (rtd), has warned that the government would not allow any group to disrupt the relative peace in the Niger Delta. According to him: "Let me assure all that the Nigerian Armed Forces which have risen creditably to challenges given them, will do whatever has to be done to keep and sustain the peace that we all enjoy now (*The vanguard*, December 23, 2009).

**Text 12.** Commending the officers and men of the armed forces for their loyalty and commitment to the sustenance of civil democratic rule, Abbe said, "With the steps being taken to improve your living conditions, there is no doubt in my mind that you will reciprocate same by ensuring absolute loyalty of President Umaru Yar'Adua while giving efficient service to our country." (*The Vanguard*, December 23, 2009)

**Text 13.** The Nigerian armed forces may have heeded the directive of President Umaru Yar'Adua to smoke out militants of the volatile Niger Delta from their camps, as reports have it that the camps of the faceless Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta were allegedly bombed in the early hours of today. (*PM News*, June 25, 2009)

**Text 14.** Navy Vows to Dislodge Militants. Worried by the rising profile of militants in the Niger Delta area, naval officers yesterday embarked on an operation aimed at dislodging those suspected to be involved in the attack of the nation's wealth, which is at sea. Those involved in hostage taking will also not be spared during the sea exercise. (*ThisDay*, January 22, 2007)

In all the newspapers as the above texts show, the JMTF were given a positive characterization that reflected the general idea of the government and the political class. For example in **Text 9**, the government forces are described as 'pillar of peace in the Niger Delta,' hence characterized as peace-makers and those who maintained 'peace and order' in the ND. The report was silent about the unconstitutional methods applied by the JMTF in securing this 'peace.' For instance in another report by *The Compass*, (May 18, 2009), the JMTF or 'operation restore hope,' was accused of being responsible for the death of about 1,500 people while over 5,000 were rendered homeless and evacuated by the local authorities. The paper described JMTF's attacks as 'bombing' and 'bombardment.' In **Text 10** however, a parliamentarian was quoted as commending the JMTF for 'sanitizing' the ND and urged the Executive members to support the efforts of the military 'to rid the Niger Delta of criminal elements.' Thus JMTF is characterized as doing a good job not minding the alleged bombardments. Similarly, in **Text 11** above, the Defence Minister was said to acknowledge the JMTF 'who had risen creditably to the challenges given them,' again, showing that the military forces, who are characterized in **Text 13** as the hunters of the militia groups, received the approval of the FG.

They had heeded the directive of the President to 'smoke out' the 'unrepentant militants.' To smoke out an animal from its hole is characteristics of a hunter who hunts for subsistence. Hence this metaphor characterizes the JMTF as hunters, which in this context is a positive construction, while the insurgents represent the animal (e.g. a bush rat or rabbit). Lastly in **Text 14**, the actions of the JMTF were characterized in terms of 'dislodging' those 'involved in the attack of the nation's wealth.' This latter idea of course, has been the main issue in the crisis about the question, 'who owns the oil wealth?' From the government perspective, the Nigerian Petroleum Act of 1969 empowered the central government to own oil wealth in Nigeria but the ND people claim their natural right to natural resources in their ancestral land. The actions of the JMTF represented the actions of the FG and their activities (in whatever form) in the ND crisis received political approval and positive representation in most media stories. In the next section we examine how the papers labeled the JMTF and how this contributed to forming the general attitude and perception of their activities.

## 8. Labeling

Labels refer to specific lexical items or 'tags' that sort out persons or a group into specific social categories that determine how members of the public should understand and judge their actions. Labels express value judgments and therefore are not value-free representations of facts. Positive or negative labels are generally linked with social attitudes associated with them and very often, the negative labels are the more powerful with greater inherent social consequences. A label naturally projects a mental model which eventually influences value judgement and a value judgement is personal, often subjective and inconsistent (van Dijk, 2005; Matheson, 2005).

However, some historical forms of labeling can be long lasting and may no longer just reflect value judgements but an established social identity. Thus negative labels tend to re-write social identities. The militia groups demanded to be identified as ‘freedom fighters,’ because this is a label which to them articulates an important part of their identity that mainstream news coverage tended to suppress. In all the news reports in the data, the JMTF is represented in terms of its nickname, i.e. ‘Operation Restore Hope’ – a label that not only constructs a positive characterization of the military intervention but also reconstructs the perception of the reading public about the activities of the JMTF in the ND crisis. Although some media reports had condemned some illegal killings of the ‘militants’ and civilians, the idea that the JMTF was in the ND to ‘restore hope’ tended to excuse their crime. In contrast, the militia groups are labeled ‘criminals,’ ‘unrepentant militants,’ ‘hoodlums’ ‘terrorists’ ‘gangs’ etc, while their hideouts are describes as ‘den’ or ‘dens.’ Referring to a house where the militias live as a ‘den’ is a highly negative metaphor that constructs the radical groups as wild animals. Only wild animals live in dens (e.g. lions). The lion script evokes the image of violence and destruction. One of the official headquarters of the insurgents located in the ND was known as ‘Camp 5’, which the media constantly referred to as ‘notorious camp 5’ (e.g. *The Vanguard*, November 21, 2009). The samples below are textual evidences of labels for the militia that reflect distorted value judgement of the press and the Nigerian government about the identity and intention of the militia groups.

**Text 15.** He commended the JTF for attempting to sanitize the place and urged members to support the Executive in the efforts to rid the Niger Delta of *criminal elements*, (*The Guardian*, May 22, 2009)

**Text 16.** *The hoodlums* who usually brandished very sophisticated weaponry, escaped through the waters of the Chanomi creeks... (*The Vanguard*, November 21, 2009)

**Text 17.** The troops, named Joint Military Task Force (JTF), carried out the attack in a bid to root out *the gangs* that had since last week held the state capital hostage in their street gun duels.

**Text 18.** The Task Force also yesterday denied an allegation by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) that a group of soldiers and some *criminal gangs*, last Thursday attacked Saipem to protest the secret execution of their colleagues accused of being sympathetic to militants.

**Text 19.** The Minister, who spoke in Warri, said the acquisition and the deployment of the new gunboats was to enable security operatives provide security and check the activities of *criminals* in the Niger Delta.

**Text 20.** The JTF also warns that the *armed hoodlums* would pay dearly in the event of any other attack on its locations and economic facilities, as we have resolved to carry out a decisive and appropriate response within the provision of its mandate (*ThisDay*, April 14, 2009)

In the above samples, the insurgents are referred to as ‘criminal elements,’ ‘hoodlums,’ ‘the gangs,’ ‘criminal gangs,’ ‘criminals,’ and ‘armed hoodlums.’ Labeling the insurgents as ‘criminals’ or ‘criminal elements/gangs’ is understandably due to the illegal means of the armed resistance. To the average Nigerian, the ‘criminal’ script especially if constructed by the press, tended to overshadow common sense and the purpose of the resistance and reconstructed the identity of the so-called ‘criminal.’ This then legitimized whatever means of handling the ‘criminal’ by the Nigeria Police. Very often, the general public whose opinion about the supposed ‘criminals’ had been moulded by the press tended to support the illegal methods applied by the government and the JMTF in handling illegality. The perception of the general public about the ND in my opinion has been negatively influenced by the media. Hence, the insurgents labeled as ‘criminal gangs,’ were viewed as mere law breakers and trouble makers who were unworthy of the course they pretended to pursue.

Again the label ‘hoodlum,’ in the Nigerian context is a highly negative representation of the identity of the ND social radical groups. In the Nigerian sense, a hoodlum or ‘thug’/ ‘miscreant’ (in some reports) is a social outcast, generally viewed as an irresponsible person. Also viewed as street urchins, they mainly cause trouble and often used by politicians to disrupt and rig elections. Thus, the labels tend to profile the ethnic militias and predict how members of the society should understand their actions. As hoodlums, they are viewed as incapable of the kind of liberation mandate they claim. By positively representing the JMTF and negatively representing the armed militias, the press moulds the perception and attitude of the public towards the militias negatively. The underlying consequence of this is that the fact of underdevelopment in the ND (the main issue in the crisis) is backgrounded, while security issues are foregrounded. The militias or ‘militants’ (i.e. ‘criminals’) are killed and their killings without the normal judicial process are justified because they broke the law. Surprisingly, the international community represented by the United Nations was almost silent about the condemnable activities of the JMTF in the ND. Of course, Britain did offer to send troops to assist the JMTF.



## 9. Agency Attribution for the Actors in the Crisis

Attribution of agency in a text reveals who does what and who receives the action carried out by the attributing agent. This can serve to legitimize a militarist ideology (e.g. the insurgent's) or legitimize the illegal killing of 'militants' or civilians by the JMTF. In this section, I have attempted to show how actors and actions in the crisis are represented mainly in the headlines and leads in data. First, I analyzed how the insurgents (or 'militants') are foregrounded as the casual agents in the clauses, thus foregrounding their actions and portraying the JMTF and civilians as victims. Generally foregrounding in texts is often placed in prominent positions in main clauses. In some of the texts agency is shared by both the JMTF and the insurgents.

### 9.1 Militants as Casual Agent

In the following sample texts, the militias are represented as casual agent of violent actions expressed in the clause, thus foregrounding their actions and portraying the JMTF and civilians as victims. In this context the insurgents are represented as exclusively responsible for initiating attacks on the JMTF and the employees of oil companies.

**Text 21.** Youths blow up ALSCON staff quarters; abduct six foreigners (headline).

Some gunmen had in the early hours of Friday attacked a residential compound, which houses expatriate employees of the Eleme Petrochemical Company/Indorama, at Akpajo in Eleme Council of Rivers State and kidnapped about 10 of them. Two policemen were killed in the process. (*The Guardian*, June 4, 2007)

**Text 22.** MEND warns JTF, threatens fresh war (*The Vanguard*, April 16, 2009)

**Text 23.** MEND claims responsibility for death of naval personnel (*PM News*, February 5, 2008)

In the above texts, the agents and their actions in the clauses are foregrounded, thus revealing the consequences of such actions in order to attract sympathy for the JMTF and other civilian victims. In **Text 21** for example, two actions or processes are attributed to the agent of the clause in the headline, i.e. 'youths' (the insurgents) - 'blow up ALSCON staff quarters' and 'abduct six foreigners.' In the headline, the number of employees kidnapped is six (the report says ten in the lead). Two policemen were said to be killed in the process. Though the passive sentence does not name the killers, it is understandable that they must have been killed by the youths. In **Text 22**, MEND (representing the insurgents) threatens fresh war. Notice that 'fresh' presupposes an existing conflict initiated by the agent, thus, constructs the activities of the insurgents as the initiators of war. This assumption appears to be vindicated by the supposed action of MEND in **Text 23**. In the headline, the insurgents claim 'responsibility for death of naval personnel.' By constantly representing the 'militants' as confrontational agents and initiators of the conflicts, the media succeed in shifting attention to the violence attributable to the militia groups. Hence, the JMTF are justified to retaliate violently. Consequently the atrocities, which the JMTF have been accused of (sometimes in the media also) were excused and welcome.

### 9.2 JMTF as the Causal Agent

In the text below JMTF are represented as the casual agent of some violent actions on the 'militants' but in most cases they are constructed as responders or as resistant agents. As pointed out above, the actions of the JMTF are positively represented as self defence, often as a process of freeing hostages and restoring peace in the ND.

**Text 24.** Soldiers raid militants' hide-out, free two expatriates (headline)

ONE suspected militant was feared killed and two expatriates freed as government forces yesterday raided a hide-out believed to belong to a band of activist Niger Delta youths. Two expatriates, both Filipino sailors, were freed in the face-off. (*The Guardian* June 4, 2007)

**Text 25.** Military foils biggest oil theft in Niger Delta (headline)

MEN of the Joint Task force (JTF) code named "Operation Restore Hope" at the weekend in Delta State made what has been regarded as the "biggest oil theft catch" in the Niger Delta region (*The Guardian*, October 1, 2007)

**Text 26.** Navy kills 7 militants, seizes arms (headline)

The Nigerian Navy has killed seven suspected militants and seized three rifles during a rescue operation at Isaka and Bakana in Rivers. (*Guardian*, June 4, 2009)

**Text 27.** Niger Delta: Army Bombs Militants (headline)

The Nigerian armed forces may have heeded the directive of President Umaru Yar'Adua to smoke out militants of the volatile Niger Delta from their camps, as reports have it that the camps of the faceless Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta were allegedly bombed in the early hours of today (*PM News*, June 25, 2008)

**Text 28.** Task Force Overwhelms Militants, Arrest 5 (headline)

The Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta has arrested five members of a militant group at the Soku gas plant area in Akuku Toru Local Government Area of Rivers State (*ThisDay*, February 16, 2007)

**Text 29.** Army, Militants in Gun Battle (headline)

Nigerian security forces repelled an attack by gunmen, on an Exxon Mobil housing compound in Eket, Akwa Ibom state, security sources said, today. The attack on the U.S. energy giant's compound in Eket, where security measures were reinforced in December, following a rise in violence in Akwa Ibom state (*PM News*, February 18, 2009)

Since the activities of the JMTF are to be viewed as an imperative national assignment, actions attributed to them are generally excused. Even in cases where such actions are illegal and condemnable, the media would add some explanation to ameliorate the gravity of their offence. Notice **Text 24**, the action 'raid' in the headline is attributed to the agent 'soldiers.' However, the raid on 'militants' hideouts' was in order to 'free two expatriates.' In the lead, one suspected militant was said to be killed but it was alright since two kidnapped 'Filipino sailors' were freed in the process. Similarly in **Text 26**, the agent 'Navy' are responsible for the killing of seven 'militants.' Again notice that the agent and the action of killing are foregrounded since it was to be interpreted as a necessity because it involved seizure of arms, which was part of the primary assignments of the JMTF. In the lead, the killings are justified because it occurred during 'a rescue operation.' In **Text 29**, (in the lead), the JMTF is said to repelled an attack by gun men (the 'militants'). The fact of repelling an attack carried out against Exxon Mobil is made explicit in the text portraying both Exxon Mobil and JMTF as victims, while the 'gun men' are the aggressors. This again represents their attacks on the insurgents as actions in defence of attacks on civilians or the JMTF.

The bombing of militants referred to in **Text 27**, was also legalized because they were merely carrying out orders from the FG and in **Text 25**, it was because the JMTF 'foiled biggest oil theft.' Although there was no mention of killings in **Text 25**, the killings of the insurgents often referred to as 'oil thieves' could not be ruled out in process of foiling the 'oil theft.' Notice that the word 'overwhelms' in the headline in **Text 28** is ambiguous. This form of discursive strategy has been applied in many of the reports to conceal the illegal killings of the insurgents or the actual numbers of civilian casualties. Two actions are attributed to the agent 'task force', i.e. 'overwhelm militants,' and 'arrest 5' (militants). Both were welcome developments. As a matter of facts, the JMTF was to apply force were necessary to disarm and arrest the armed activists. However, the JMTF went the extra mile and began to bomb the insurgents and destroying villages. The reports of the destruction of the Gbaramatu kingdom in Warri were a clear example. According to the *Nigerian Compass* of May 18, 2009, a clash between MEND and the JMTF at the Oporoza community (part of the Gbaramatu kingdom) resulted in the death of about 500 people while over 5,000 others were evacuated by the local authorities. The natives subsequently requested the FG to withdraw the troops. *Tell* magazine of June 10, 2009 also reported that no fewer than 2,000 persons were believed to have been killed during the JMTF attacks on the seven communities in Gbramatu kingdom, including *Oporoza*, *Okerenkoko*, *Kurutie*, *Kokodiagbene* and *Kunukunuma*. These communities were suspected to be harbouring 'militant camps'. Close to 50,000 persons were said to be displaced and sought humanitarian assistance at Warri from the embattled communities. Thus the JMTF missed the assumed initial targets of their assignment, i.e. protecting oil installations and restoring peace in the Niger Delta.

### 9.3 Agency Deletion

Through the process of nominalization or passivization (i.e. in the headlines and leads), the agents of the clauses are deleted, thus some obvious actions of the JMTF are not made explicit. This is to avoid the notion that they are altogether responsible for the killings. The assumption is that in a war situation, soldiers could mistakenly shoot at the wrong targets. In **Text 33** (second part of the headline) an agentless clause shows that responsibility is not attributed to anyone, rather the action is received by both the JMTF and the militias. The circumstance of the action is 'unprovoked attack.' In **Text 30**, the process 'die' is attributed to 'foreign oil worker', 'two militants,' and a 'soldier.' However in the overline, the positive action of freeing hostages is attributed to the soldiers.

**Text 30.** Foreign Oil Worker, two Militants, Soldier Die in Gun Duel. Soldiers free six expatriate hostages (*Guardian*, November 23, 2006)

**Text 31.** 32 feared killed as soldiers, gang clash in Rivers (*The Guardian*, August 17, 2007)

**Text 32.** Nigeria: 14 Militants Killed (headline)

Yenagoa — A confrontation on Sunday night between militants and soldiers of the Joint Task Force (JTF) along the Okilo Creek near Igbomotoru River, Tebideba Route, Bayelsa State, has left 14 suspected militants dead (*ThisDay*, April 14, 2009)

**Text 33.** Bloodbath in Niger Delta. Nine soldiers, three militants killed in 'unprovoked' attack (*Nigerian Compass* December 27, 2008)

**Text 34.** N'Delta: 3 more Ijaw communities razed. 4000 additional troops deployed to beef up JTF (*Daily sun*, June 5, 2009)

As pointed out above, agentless statements convey less information and tend to hide responsibility for negative actions. So it is not surprising that in this context, the media in the above texts tends to conceal or mitigate the roles of the JMTF. For example in **Text 31**, thirty-two people are said to be killed 'as soldiers, gang clash,' the actual agent of the killing is concealed. The circumstance, 'as soldiers, gang clash,' implies that those killed were simply victims of the circumstance; neither the soldiers nor the 'gang' are to blame. In other words, they might even be victims of the insurgents referred to as 'gang' as they attacked the soldiers. Thus implying that the soldiers (or the JMTF) might have been innocent of the killings. Similarly, the agent of 'razed' in **Text 34** is unknown. The second part of the headlines simply reports that additional troops were deployed to beef up the JMTF; it did not imply that the government forces could have set the communities ablaze. However, the entire news context made it clear that the razing of the three Ijaw communities were carried out by the JMTF. We can then see that representation of actors or victims in news text are not value-free; they present point of views that may portray the subject negatively or positively depending on the purpose of the reporters.

## 10. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the Nigerian press was sympathetic of the activities of the JMTF in spite of obvious condemnable killings of the insurgents and attacks on civilians. This could have been informed by some general negative assumption about the ND crisis, also largely influenced by the press. At a point, the media exclusively focused their attention on the security situation in Delta region, particularly the attacks on oil pipelines and kidnapping of oil workers, neglecting perhaps the more important causes of the crisis, i.e. poverty in the ND and devastation of the environment despite mild protests by the people. Unfortunately to the average Nigerian, violence became almost a second name for the ND and popular feelings towards this minority group became negative. I have pointed out in the analysis that one strategy of positively representing the JMTF in the crisis was the exaggeration of the armed protests in the region by constantly referring to it as a 'war.' This not only constructs the insurgents as a stable military formation at war against the state, it also reconstructs the sectarian crisis in Nigeria as a civil war, which was not the case.

Again, by constantly reporting the insurgency as mere activities of some hapless kidnappers and abductors, the brutal actions of the JMTF was justified and viewed as imperative and necessary. JMTF was then positively represented as national heroes on a rescue mission in spite of indiscriminate killings of the insurgents and civilians. The press also applied the strategy of labeling to portray the insurgents on a negative light. While the JMTF were constantly referred to as 'Operation restore hope,' the insurgents were labeled, 'militants,' 'hoodlums,' 'criminals,' or 'terrorists,' hence, making their killings by the JMTF excusable. The press also applied agency attribution to make the actions of the JMTF all the more important. While positive actions are attributed to the JMTF, negative actions are attributed to the 'militants.' The insurgents are often constructed as the aggressors while the JMTF are the victims; thus, the JMTF are either on a defence mission or on a rescue mission. Even in clear cases of outright military offensive against civilian communities, the general public is made to believe that they (the ND people) deserve such treatment. This study therefore argues that military intervention is never the best option for resolving the Nigerian ND crisis.

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