

# A guide to militant, ex-militant and activist groups in the Niger Delta

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The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) are Nigeria's "new" Niger Delta militancy phenomenon. They have issued challenges to the Nigerian government, international oil companies and the military. Within a span of less than 3 months they are believed to be primarily responsible for reducing Nigeria's oil production from a (theoretical) 2.2m barrels per day to around 1.4m barrels per day by the end of May 2016. They have mainly targeted Nigerian state and international oil companies' pipeline infrastructure with explosives attacks. The spectre of their involvement in maritime piracy and kidnappings has been raised as well.

However, they are not alone in espousing a Niger Delta agenda – whether pro or anti-government. Confusingly, a number of groups have sprung up (or become more vocal) in 2015 and 2016 following president Buhari's reduction of amnesty payments, cancellation of security contracts for former militants and the indictment of former ex-militant leader Tompolo. The NDA's aggressive go-it-alone strategy seems to be both inspirational and divisive.

This and other factors have led to a situation similar to 2003/4 and 2006, where a budding Niger Delta insurgency fragmented into sometimes warring militant factions with competing agendas, united only in their hatred of the government. The corollary of the current development is a very diverse security threat throughout the Niger Delta, depending on the locations in which groups are active and to which end.

This guide to the most relevant groups that are politically and militarily active is intended to provide an overview of their agendas, operating areas and potential links amongst each other.

## Niger Delta Avengers

The Niger Delta Avengers went "public" on or around 30 January 2016. They have claimed responsibility for 12 out of the 19 attacks (or clusters of attacks) against oil & gas infrastructure that have taken place in the Niger Delta since January 2016.

The NDA espouse the following military and political objectives:

- Cripple the Nigerian economy ('Operation Red Economy')
- Force the government to negotiate the demands in a 'sovereign national conference'
- Re-allocation of Nigerian ownership of oil blocs (in favour of Niger Deltans)
- Autonomy/self-determination for the Niger Delta

The pattern of attacks suggests that this rather small but well-trained and determined group is primarily based in Warri South West LGA in Delta state with some operational capacity in the Brass and Nembe LGA in Bayelsa state. They deny having attacked any military targets and so far have not acknowledged any "associations" with other groups, except for the Biafran activists in general. They have actively denounced some of the more violence-prone 'rogue' groups, although the call to order issued on their website on 4 June 2016 can be seen as propagandistic coup in order to keep their well-honed profile as the pre-eminent militant group in the Niger Delta.

## Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force

The JNDLF are most likely a confederation of Bayelsa-based groups that include the Red Egbesu Water Lions and was first publicly mentioned on 2 June 2016. The name is reminiscent of the late John Togo's Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF); Togo was betrayed to the Nigerian security services (and subsequently killed) by the former militant leader Tompolo. The JNDLF's public rhetoric is strongly infused with the frustration of former militants supporting the government.

Size and composition of the groups are uncertain, but if they are recruited from John Togo's former rank-and-file soldiers then there is a potential for several hundred seasoned fighters with good maritime attack skills joining the ranks of this organisation. Unlike the NDA the JNDLF have vowed to take on oil companies, individuals and the Nigerian military head on, rather than engaging in indirect 'economic warfare'. The JNDLF have issued multiple and diverse threats against 'high profile' targets and declared a no-fly zone for the Nigerian Air Force, but have little to show as of early June 2016.

## Red Egbesu Water Lions

The Red Egbesu Water Lions are apparently a small, opportunistic group operating in South Ijaw LGA (Bayelsa). They have so far carried out one attack on 17 May (date of their first mention) against an Agip pipeline and claimed support of the NDA, but in fact their attack had not been co-ordinated with NDA propaganda. Their spokesman is also a part of the JNDLF's leadership committee, suggesting the group is limited to a geographic location and in need of allies to extend its reach.

## New Delta Suicide Squad (NDSS)

This group made a press release on 26 May 2016, but otherwise has no track record or known association with other militant groups. The focus of their threats seems to be on 'secondary' targets, such as tank farms, oil jetties, private terminals etc. Although they espouse the usual 'political' Niger Delta agenda, there is a distinctly extortionate undertone to their press statement.

### Concerned Militant Leaders (CML)

The CML was first mentioned in a press conference with the NDPDF on 4 January 2016 in support of the Biafran cause, held by the CML spokesman General Ben and the NDPDF leader General Playboy. General Ben later went on to claim responsibility for the kidnapping of five crew members from the tanker LEON DIAS on 31 January 2016, in the course of which he made threats to destroy the ship if the Biafran activist and leader of IPOB Nnamdi Kanu (detained by the Nigerian government) was not released.

### Niger Delta People's Democratic Front (NDPDF)

The NDPDF is an established militant/activist platform that has been dormant for some time until the group was re-invigorated by Precious Iyoyo (aka General Playboy) in January. The NDPDF have held a joint press conference with the CML. Both organisations purported to support the Biafran cause.

### Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)

IPOB was set up in 2014 as one of the activist platforms that agitates for the restoration of the sovereignty of the (Igbo) Republic of Biafra along the pre-colonial lines. Although implicated in the LEON DIAS kidnapping case by General Ben of the CML, the organisation claimed that this was a ploy by the federal government to criminalise them and have an excuse to keep the IPOB leader Kanu under arrest. While tentative connections to Ijaw Niger Delta groups may exist, the IPOB agenda actually argues for a separation from Nigeria on ethnic grounds that would not make Ijaw militants natural allies (except in their opposition to the government).

### Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)

MASSOB was established around 2000 as an Igbo ethnic militia with the goal to re-establish the Republic of Biafra. While the objective has remained constant the organisation has moderated over the years into an activist platform. The group, however, is riven by factionalism. MASSOB leader Uchenna Madu has denied the group's involvement in the LEON DIAS kidnapping, and like IPOB, MASSOB was absolved by the Nigerian military. Irrespective of this, General Ben (CML) and General Playboy (NDPDF) issued an ultimatum (to 3 June) to the Nigerian Government to release corpses of 10 Biafran MASSOB activists killed during a rally on 30 May. However, no action followed. Instead, on 5 June 2016, MASSOB 'pledged allegiance to the NDA'.

### Leadership, Peace and Cultural Development Initiative (LPCDI)

The LPCDI is a pro-government ex-militant platform formed in early 2013 and led by former militant leader and 'National Coordinator' Reuben Wilson (General Pastor). It is not exactly clear who is represented by the LPCDI, but influential ex-militants like Boyloaf (Bayelsa) or Ateke Tom (Rivers) appear to be associated with it, although the focus is likely on Bayelsa ex-militants. The group strongly advocated to retain the Amnesty Programme, but condemned pipeline attacks as early as January 2016 and in March declared its support of the Government to stop the campaign of pipeline sabotage. The group specifically condemned the NDA on 20 June and has urged the Government not to negotiate with them.

### National Coalition of the Niger Delta Ex-Agitators, NCNDE-A

The NCNDE-A was formed around 2014 and represents ex-militants from Delta state with a strong bias towards the Urhobo ethnicity. Spokesman Isaak Akpodoro made headlines on 13 May 2016 when he implicated former president Goodluck Jonathan as having masterminded the NDA.

### Ijaw Youth Council

This venerable activist platform was established in the 1990s and brought forth many of the notable militant leaders, like Mujahid Dokubo-Asari and other MEND leaders later on. The group remains a vocal advocate of Ijaw self-determination and has traditionally consisted of rival factions, but spokesman Eric Omar condemned the NDA on 9 May 2016. This is believed to have set the tone for many other Ijaw ex-militant leaders who subsequently denounced the NDA's activities.

For further information contact Risk Intelligence.