



A Justice in Nigeria Now Special Report  
October 1, 2010

***Operation Restore Hope Killed the Hope and Livelihood of Tens of Thousands***

One Year After the Cessation of Attacks on an Oil Producing Region  
in the South East Niger Delta

*“Most of the students like me who tried to escape during the deadly incident are dead. Some in the streets, forests ...they were killed by the bombs. I lost my mother and six of my brothers in the incident. Two of my three sisters are still trapped in the forest. The place is too dangerous for them to come out now. They can't cross with boat and they can't risk swimming. The JTF people have blocked the waterways. One of my sisters has been missing. Nobody seems to know her whereabouts. The military people were using their helicopter chopper to destroy everything we have ever had. I saw war with my naked eyes. I saw my mum's dead body. I saw my brothers lying helpless on the ground. Everyone was running without direction. It is a bitter experience. They are wicked people. They are heartless. I don't have any family member as militants. We used to survive with fishing. It was through fishing business that my mum pays our school fees. Why will the FG send military men to kill us, to destroy our community? We don't have anywhere else to go now. No home, no place to go. My OND [school] certificate, my only hope for a better tomorrow has been destroyed”. - [Miss Peres Popo, 21, from Oporoza in testimony given to Environmental Rights Action on May 23, 2009.](#)*



[One of the few houses bombed from above that remains standing in a mostly flattened village in Gbaramatu Kingdom after the Nigerian military bombed in May 2009](#)

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### Context

Although the stated justification for the military attacks launched by the Nigerian Federal Government under the moniker “Operation Restore Hope” against the very poor people living in an oil producing region of the Niger Delta in mid May 2009 was to “root out militants” (with the main target named being militant leader Tompolo), photo and video evidence substantiates claims that the assault intentionally targeted villages and innocent civilians.

Gbaramatu Kingdom had been home to an estimated 20,000 mostly poor villagers living in 163 communities, villages and hamlets. [Attacks on civilians commenced in the region’s major town center, Oporoza on May 14<sup>th</sup>](#). It was a day of festivities on the one year anniversary of the current King’s reign that had drawn villagers from throughout the area. The merriment quickly turned to horror when it became clear that three or four helicopter gunships were also headed to Oporoza where they opened fire. [It is reported that the military deployed three or four helicopter gunboats for aerial bombing](#), two Naval Ships; *NNS Obula* and *NNS Nwanba* and troops of ground soldiers. [See Environmental Rights Action’s Report for more eyewitness testimony](#). Those who survived the assault fled into the bush and hid for up to two weeks in the thick mangrove forests without adequate food or water, some of those hiding in the bush were wounded and unable to access medical care. Eventually most of the internally displaced women and children made their way to the homes of relatives in Warri and the surrounding area outside the military cordon or to the [refugee camp established by the Gender Action Group](#). Others were cared for at the Ogbe Ijoh General hospital in Warri. The men remained in hiding longer for fear of being accused of being militants.

The attacks, undertaken in the guise of rooting out militants continued in residential villages from May to July 2009 bringing massive firepower to bear on defenseless communities. According to multiple sources, the following villages were destroyed in a series of coordinated ground and air attacks from mid May to end of July 2009:

Oporoza  
Okerenkoko  
Kurutie  
Kunukunuma  
Benikurkuru

One source also states that the following villages were attacked

Kokodiagbene  
Azama  
Ubefan



Another bombed home in a different village in Gbaramatu Kingdom

Ultimately, up to twenty thousand people were internally displaced. Those lucky enough to escape and make their way to the Warri hospital in the first days after the bombing of Oporoza and Okerenkoko were [confronted with further repression by military forces](#) who entered the premises, harassing and threatening the shell shocked victims on May 19<sup>th</sup>. Given that the

homes and livelihoods of the women living in the refugee camps were decimated, some effort to provide training, skills and supplies was made. For instance women at the IDP camp established by the Gender Action Group were taught knitting and given the yarn necessary to create beautifully patterned sweaters. However, no grants, credit or micro-credit was made available to the internally displaced women by any arm of government to enable them to purchase supplies on their own to start up a business employing their new skills or training.

### Why Did This Happen?

[A secret military strategy document](#) named “Operation Restore Hope” foretelling an assault on militants was leaked nearly a year in advance of the bombardment and was reported in the Nigerian media. The strategy became a reality on May 13<sup>th</sup> when the military sent gunboats to the militant camp headed up by Tompolo, known as Camp 5 and skirmishes erupted. The events of May 13<sup>th</sup> were the spark that ignited the ongoing military attacks in reprisal throughout Gbaramatu Kingdom.

Some debate whether the responsibility for three months of military incursions lies with the militants who allegedly killed military men who arrived on a naval vessel at their camp or with the Nigerian military for intentionally provoking a small war. JINN notes that the root cause of the violence is the oil economy that brings fabulous wealth to U.S. and European companies, high ranking oil firm executives, the Nigerian Federal Government, and corrupt Nigerian officials, while at the same time impoverishing formerly self sufficient villagers living in the communities where oil is produced. The majority of these villagers lack access to clean drinking water, electricity, and educational or employment opportunities. Most live on less than \$1 a day. Oil production in the Delta has been underway for fifty years and resistance was entirely peaceful until six years ago, when a loosely federated armed militancy, known collectively as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged. MEND’s demands mirrored those of the peaceful resistance movement and include access to education and jobs, environmental mitigation, and investment in the development of oil producing communities.

Once the military attacks on villages commenced in May 2009, MEND destroyed key elements of the oil infrastructure, shutting in production to the extent that major multinational companies evacuated all non essential personnel. Oil revenues flowing into the Nigerian treasury plummeted and the cost of a barrel of oil on the world market increased.

Eventually, the violence subsided when the MEND militants agreed to accept a government offer of amnesty that included payment and job training for former militants who turned in their weapons. Many within Nigeria and the international community were critical of the Nigerian government’s amnesty offer which didn’t attempt to resolve the root causes of the crisis and is therefore unlikely to have lasting effect.

### Role of the Media

At the outset of the violence and into June, the military and Federal Government denied claims by local villagers and by Nigerian and international NGO's that unarmed civilians were targeted. These claims were fostered by the military's strict cordoning off of the area and, in particular, barring journalists, NGO's and aid workers from entry. The fact that the military and federal government prohibited entry to those whose job it is to bear witness is a contributing factor to the world's inattention to the plight of thousands of innocent civilians who to this day struggle to reconstruct their lives. With access to the area restricted, much of the local and international press was hesitant to publish the story.

At the same time that the Nigerian Government and Military were telling the press and foreign governments that they were not engaged in attacks on the civilian population, the House of Representatives passed a Resolution calling on the Federal Government to extend military operations (from Delta State) into Rivers and Bayelsa States. During debates House Representative Bala Ibn N'Allah of Kebbi State said that "we can do away with 20 million militants for the rest 120 million Nigerians to live." We note that 20 million is the estimated population of the Delta, thus during a war by the government on militants, a House Representative was referring to the entire population of the oil producing region as militants. He later called this a "parliamentary joke". The Representative's inflammatory statements did not pass entirely unnoticed. Hope Ifoke Orviri opined on May 25<sup>th</sup> in the Nigerian Compass, "What do you make of a genocidal statement of Rep lawmaker Bala Ibn Na'Allah that 'If 20 million (in Niger Delta states) are killed to save 120 million Nigerians, that is not too much'?" The statement was also reported by Emma Madaubuchi in the Nigerian Independent on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

**Explosive new video evidence has emerged that powerfully documents the flattened state of one of the villages, Okerenkoko, bombed to rubble on May 15, 2009.** The footage was shot in August 2009, when a few residents were allowed their first opportunity to return under military escort. The shocking footage viewable [here](#) clearly demonstrates the total ruin of a village. The few buildings that remain standing show the kind of damage one might expect from an aerial bombing with large holes ripped through the roofs. Also recently posted are [short video clips](#) of bombed ruins of buildings in Oporoza.

### JINN and Delta Peace Campaign to End the Violence

Justice In Nigeria Now spearheaded an [official request to the International Criminal Court](#) for an investigation into those responsible for the humanitarian crisis. An ICC Judge stated in the Nigerian press shortly thereafter that the ICC found it had jurisdiction in the matter. At the time of this writing, within the ICC Office of the Prosecutor, the Information and Evidence Unit is undertaking an analysis of the evidence to determine if it will move forward with an official ICC investigation.

Justice in Nigeria Now, joined together with allies at Niger Delta Professionals for Development, Sweet Crude and the Institute for Policy Studies Sustainable Energy and Environment Network and Foreign Policy in Focus to form a coalition called Delta Peace. Together the Delta Peace coalition attempted to gain media attention and support from U.S. policymakers to pressure the Nigerian government to end the military engagement and pursue a path of peace.

With the leadership of the Sweet Crude team, on May 22, 2009 Senator Russ Feingold issued the following statement:

*On the Nigerian military's ongoing offensive in the Niger Delta*

"I am very concerned by reports that hundreds of civilians have been killed and potentially thousands displaced by the Nigerian military's ongoing offensive in Nigeria's oil-rich Delta region. Some military actions may be justified to stop the criminality, kidnappings and killings by militants in the Niger Delta, but such measures should be accompanied by a larger political strategy. Genuine peacemaking will require not only legitimate political negotiations but a convincing case for transforming the illicit war economy into one of peace. The Nigerian government needs to undertake a serious and sustained initiative to address the underdevelopment of the region. I urge the Obama administration to think creatively about how we can work multilaterally to help end this long-standing crisis in the Niger Delta."

On May 23<sup>rd</sup> Senator John Kerry issued the following statement:

"The Niger Delta is home to massive oil reserves, but these resources have brought more suffering than wealth to the people of the Delta through corruption, environmental destruction, and lack of development. Reports of growing civilian casualties and displacement in the latest clash between the government forces and armed groups are extremely disturbing. Civilian protection and humanitarian needs must be prioritized in the current offensive, and all parties to the conflict should engage in a process to bring an end to the widespread violence and criminality that have long plagued the region and to address the needs of the population."

Both Senators are members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

### The Situation Today

Despite its responsibility for the total destruction of the area, the Nigerian Government reportedly has not allocated funds for rebuilding or to compensate victims who lost all their homes, all their physical assets and their livelihood.

On the other hand, the Delta State government pronounced its commitment to rebuilding. By last December it purportedly began laying fewer than 150 foundations for new homes in Okerenkoko. However, according to multiple sources after commencing the foundation work in December 2009, the State Government stalled on any further rebuilding plans and most of Okerenkoko's internally displaced residents, like those of the other villages in the region have not been able to return home and are sheltered with family members elsewhere. They have been given no assistance in rebuilding their lives, although they lost everything at the hands of the Nigerian military. This is the same military that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged to explore providing additional assistance to when she visited the country in August 2009.

The Nigerian government's amnesty program does not appear likely to succeed. [Many former militants claim that they are not receiving payments to enable them to buy food or support themselves.](#) Many are not receiving any real job training. Those who have received some job training are not placed in jobs. What training is underway is focused on nonviolence. However, the Nigerian police and military are not also being trained in nonviolent responses. Also, we note that the resistance to the abuses associated with oil extraction was a nonviolent struggle for decades. The question should be asked: Why did it become violent? This question, whose answer is the underdevelopment of the region by the federal government, the environmental damage by oil companies and the military and police suppression of peaceful protest and resulting human rights abuses would reveal the real, more costly and more complex solutions necessary to create peace in Nigeria. Given the bombing attacks in Abuja on the occasion of Nigeria's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its independence, pursuing real solutions is gaining increased urgency.

### One Immediate Action You Can Take

JINN urges you to join it in calling on the State Department and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton not to provide the additional military assistance she pledged to explore when she was in Nigeria last year. Looking at the [video](#) of Okerenkoko Village, you will see for yourself that this is a government that does not use its military responsibly and has a history of egregious attacks on its own people. (The [attacks](#) in Gbaramatu are not the only time that the military has destroyed civilian communities in oil producing areas) [Sign our letter](#) calling on the Obama Administration and U.S. government instead to encourage a path to peace through diplomatic talks to resolve the root causes of the violence in the Delta.

### What You Can Do

1. [Sign JINN's letter](#) telling Secretary of State Hillary Clinton not to provide additional military support to Nigeria and to promote a path to peace through dialog and root cause solutions
2. [Become a JINN member](#), stay informed and be involved in an ongoing way.
3. [Buy a copy of Sweet Crude](#) and host a screening to educate your community at your school, church, community group or home. JINN and Sweet Crude will help you set it up and find speakers to join you if you like.
4. [Get JINN's toolkit](#) and pass a resolution in your City calling on your elected congressional delegation and the Obama administration to support a path to peace in Nigeria through dialog and root cause solutions (several cities have already taken this step).
5. [Donate to JINN](#) to help them continue sharing information and strategic actions.

### Root Cause Solutions to the Crisis

Only by dealing with the root causes of the crisis will the unrest in the Delta finally be resolved. The Nigerian Federal Government must:

- Invest in development of the Delta region and ensure the availability of clean water, electricity, education and economic opportunity.
- Retrain militants by providing jobs training with real skills and placement.
- Provide training to the military and police on nonviolent responses to communities.
- An independent and neutral third party must be engaged to fully audit the environmental damage to the Delta, which can serve as a baseline for clean-up efforts.
- Ensure electoral integrity, access to voting and a real voice in governance for all residents of the Delta.
- Create the conditions for a free press to investigate and report without fetter.

### Media Coverage

Note that the Nigerian government used multiple tactics to keep this story out of the news; from cordoning off the area and barring journalists' access, to refusing or delaying interminably response to journalists' visa requests, to stating that they were not attacking villages. Here is a partial list of media coverage of the violence in the Delta:

**Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB):** An English language radio program hosted by Derek Mehrens, heard live in Iran and sent by shortwave around Africa, Asia and the Middle East aired a half hour segment with JINN Founder Laura Livoti.

**KPFA News:** At least twice in May segments were aired including an interview with Niger Delta Professionals for Development Founder, Joel Bisina

**KPOO Radio:** May 23<sup>rd</sup> Host Donald Lacy of Wake Up America interviewed JINN Founder, Laura Livoti

**[Wall Street Journal:](#)** May 20<sup>th</sup>, Will Connors wrote a story about the increased cost of a barrel of oil, "Nigeria Attack Disrupts Chevron Flow."

**Bloomberg News:** May 20<sup>th</sup>, published a wire story providing the Nigerian government's justification for using military might

**Sahara Reporters** web news: Posted breaking video footage showing that military firepower was in fact brought to bear on civilian residences in Oporoza

**Next** web news posted a story by Chris Eriyamremu covering the Gender Action Group's call for rebuilding of homes

**The Daily Sun**, a Nigerian Paper on June 8, 2009 published the story by Murphy Ganagana "N'Delta: Ijaws flee homes - As 4000 troops arrive Warri"

[National Public Radio on June 22<sup>nd</sup> ran a story by Ofeibea Quist-Arcton:](#) "Nigerian Military Seizes Former Rebel Stronghold," (*This is the first piece heard in the U.S. directly from the creeks since the beginning of the attacks on May 13.*) **Vanguard (Nigeria):** "War in the creeks: US Senate seeks end to military offensive," May 24, 2009 The United States (US) Senate is seeking an immediate cessation of the military offensive in Delta State, and the adoption of a creative political process in resolving the Niger Delta crisis.

[Voice of America:](#) "Displaced Nigerians in Desperate Need of Water, Food and Services," by Gilbert da Costal was published on May 24. Impoverished villagers in Nigeria's Niger Delta have been forced to flee for their lives since the army launched its offensive against militants last week.

**Guardian Newspaper (Nigeria):** "Enahoro, Soyinka, others want halt to military action in Delta," May 22, 2009. A BARRAGE of condemnations has continued to trail the rising death toll among civilians, especially women and children in the military assault on militants in the Delta region.

[Reuters:](#) "Nigerian parliament urges wider oil delta offensive," May 22, Camillus Eboh. Nigeria's lower house of parliament has passed a resolution urging President Umaru Yar'Adua to extend the biggest military operation for years in the Niger Delta into neighboring states.

[BBC News:](#) "Thousands flee Nigeria Delta fighting," May 21, 2009, Andrew Walker. Thousands of refugees from a remote area of a Nigerian oil-producing state have fled fighting between the military and oil rebels; sleeping in the swamps and too afraid to go home.

[Democracy Now!:](#) "Massive Casualties Feared in Nigerian Military Attack on Niger Delta," Villages Filmmaker Sandi Cioffi speaks about recent military violence in the Niger Delta that has led to civilian deaths and villages destroyed including the village of Oporoza where much of her film was shot.

[Reuters:](#) "Nigeria army vows to push on with oil delta campaign," by Segun Owen, Warri, Nigeria, May 21 – Nigeria's army declared a militant leader wanted dead or alive on Thursday and pressed on with an offensive in the Niger Delta which Amnesty International said may have killed hundreds.

**Vanguard (Nigeria):** "War in the Creeks: Chased from home, driven away from refugee camp – Horrifying tales of victims," THURSDAY, May 21, five days after the Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Niger-Delta started the bombardment of Ijaw communities and militant camps in the creeks of Gbaramatu kingdom, Warri South-West Local Government Area, an Ijaw youth from Oporoza community, Mike Itima and more than 20,000 others are still trapped in the forests, where they ran into on Friday, May 15, to avoid airborne missiles from invading soldiers.

**The Nation (Nigeria):** “Youth corps members face sanction” The fate of some youth corps members in Delta State, who survived the renewed clash between the military and militants, hang in the balance.

**Business Day (Nigeria)** “Senate asks committee to probe N/Delta military campaign,” After days of military campaigns in the Niger Delta, the senate, Wednesday, moved in and directed its committee on defense to investigate the campaigns and report back on the situation in the affected areas.

**Common Dreams:** “Civil Society Groups Call on ICC Prosecutor to Investigate Military Violence in the Niger Delta,” May 20, 2009 THE HAGUE – May 20

**This Day (Nigeria):** “N/Delta: The Human Cost of a Crisis,” May 20, 2009, Kayode Komolafe. Amid the claims and counter-claims by the military authorities and the militants there is an irrefutable point: the operations in the Chanomi creek of Delta State have come with a toll.

**Sahara Reporters:** “The government of Nigeria and its acts of genocide & terror against the people of the Niger Delta,” The Ijaw People’s Association and Bayelsa State Union, all of Great Britain and Ireland are greatly concerned about the reports reaching us that the Nigerian Armed Forces in the form of the Joint Task Force (JTF) for the Niger Delta is attacking and invading a number of towns and villages in Warri South Local Government Area of Delta State Nigeria, from Wednesday 13 up till now, Thursday 21 May 2009.

**Sahara Reporters:** “Strategies to Stem Out Militant Activities”, a secret Army memo detailing attacks on the “Western” Niger Delta region revealed. In 2007, the Nigerian Army defense headquarters issued a secret memo detailing its plan to wipe out “militants” from the Niger Delta region.

#### **RESOURCES:**

**Sweet Crude** -- [www.sweetcrudemovie.com](http://www.sweetcrudemovie.com) --Shot on location in Gbaramatu Kingdom and Oporoza before the bombing, the film includes a rare interview with militant leader Tompolo.

Amnesty International [Statement ERA report](#) with Eyewitness testimony

[Video footage](#) of the villages destroyed by Nigerian military attacks

**Photos** of the villages destroyed by Nigerian military [attacks](#)