

# Oil at risk in Niger Delta

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As Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez continues to move further to the left, and instability escalates in the Middle East, Nigeria, the fifth-largest oil supplier to the United States, has become even more important.

However, due to neglect in Nigeria's main oil-producing region, the Niger Delta, future oil supplies are in jeopardy. As in the lead-up to the 2003 presidential elections, that region can expect increased violence before the April 21 elections. Disruption in Nigeria, coupled with a possible negative action by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, or a unilateral Venezuelan move to limit U.S. oil supplies, could catastrophically affect the U.S. and other economies worldwide.

The Niger Delta produces 2.5 million barrels per day, which is 40 percent of Nigeria's gross domestic product. However, the region is one of the most impoverished in all Nigeria, receiving only 13 percent of the revenue generated from their oil sales.

Delta locals perceive this small percentage, and the vast underdevelopment in their region, as the due to a lack of interest on the part of the central government in their poverty. So a variety of rebel movements have formed in recent years, the latest of which is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

Since its inception in January 2006, the Movement has conducted some effective attacks on the oil industry, cutting oil production by between 20 percent and 25 percent. It has forced Shell, the largest foreign oil producer in the country, to consider closing all its onshore facilities by 2008. Accordingly, these further attacks may have a cascading impact on imports to America.

On coming to office in 1999, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo tried to address the region's concerns by forming the Niger Delta Development Program (NDDP). As evidenced by escalating violence, in six years the NDDP has effected little change. Much of the region still lacks potable water, electricity or decent health facilities.

It seems Nigeria's notorious government corruption can be blamed for most of the NDDP's ineffectiveness. And when violence spiked in the region in early 2006, Mr. Obasanjo attempted to quell it using force. He introduced great numbers of troops, who have not only been unable to stop the violence but have reportedly conducted mass arrests and even destroyed entire villages. This effort has done little to solve the region's long-term problems and has only added to the animosity there.

Until the Nigerian government addresses the sociopolitical and economic concerns in the Niger Delta, violence and damage to the country's stability will continue. A quick tangible way to answer the concerns of the region is to increase the percentage of oil revenue the area receives. While the 1960 constitution initially mandated a 50 percent return from oil revenues, an increase to between 20 percent and 25 percent would be more than digestible.

Second, the government needs to institute very specific civil affairs and civic action projects that would provide potable water, increase the electrical grid, and provide increased medical care. While doing all

that, the government needs to avoid at all costs attempts to put down these rebellions with military force alone. These operations result in needless loss of life for both sides and only increase turmoil.

Nigeria is a very important trading partner of the U.S. Therefore, we need to do whatever we can to assist in development projects. A first step could be greater cooperation between the U.S. and the new Nigerian government. Assuming these April elections are deemed free and fair, the U.S. could invite the new president to the White House, leading potentially to a variety of interchanges and agreements. These might include an increase in student visas for Nigerians, an increase in food aid, and greater security cooperation.

Elements like U.S. Army Special Forces and Drug Enforcement Administration could train local military and police respectively. Our appropriate governmental elements could help conduct civil affairs and civic action projects such as medical missions into the region, taking care not to engage in combat or enforcement. In exchange, Nigeria's government would have to illustrate tangible results from its development projects in the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta situation reflects various concerns. The only way to pacify the region is through a policy that addresses all of these concerns simultaneously, not just one. Unfortunately, it is unlikely any of these policies, if made effective today, would prevent an rise in violence in the immediate future.

However, no matter who is the next president of Nigeria, reducing poverty and disarray in the Delta must be a top priority.

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