

## **Nigerian Newspaper Coverage of Terror Tactics of Militants in the wake of the Niger Delta Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

Militants fighting in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria unleashed terror in the country between 2006 and 2009 in a fierce battle for resource control. Consequently, content analysis was employed to investigate how four Nigerian newspapers (the *THISDAY*, *The Guardian*, the *Vanguard* and *The Sun*) covered the terror tactics adopted by these militants in pursuit of their cause. The systematic sampling technique was adopted. The pattern of coverage indicated that kidnapping was the most reported form of terror tactics, followed by vandalism of oil facilities and oil bunkering. Killings ranked third. Coverage spiked in 2006, suggesting it could have been the worst year for Nigeria in the period studied. Findings suggested that a group not formally designated as “terrorist” can commit acts of terror in such a horrific scale for which terrorist organisations are known for. Summed up, results indicated that terror had far-reaching consequences for Nigeria. Consequently, the researcher recommended that in times of terror, journalists chose carefully the angle to mirror and the scale to project, while giving prominence to the widespread public condemnation that always trails such acts and efforts by the authorities to restore normal life again after terror merchants have done their evil.

**Keywords:** Militancy, Terrorism, Newspaper Coverage, Niger Delta, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

When conflicts break out, the media steps in! This is understandable. It is the media’s role to keep citizens informed. In international conflicts, especially wars, what most people know about them are from mediated images. Therefore, peoples’ opinion about global events, including major conflicts across the world are to some degree influenced by media portrayals. A key component of international news is terrorism, which has been on the rise since after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US and the subsequent US military action in Afghanistan in 2002. Nigeria currently has her hands full in trying to contain the Boko Haram and other terrorist groups’ deadly attacks that are fast decimating her population in the North. The country’s Niger Delta region, known for her rich oil resources, was in the jaws of militants between 2006 and 2009 when some angry youth in the region unleashed terror on the state in a fierce battle that has been dubbed “the resource control war.” The background to the crisis is painted in lucid terms:

Against a background of inadequate response to peaceful demands by the region’s indigenous people for development by the Nigerian state

and oil transnationals, some restive youths, pushed by stark realities of poverty occasioned by the environmentally harmful practices of oil TNCs and institutionalised deprivation by the Nigerian state and pulled by the immediate attention and benefits associated with a violent approach, took to arms struggle to press home their demands (Aaron & George, 2010, p. 3).

From initial peaceful demonstrations by locals against neglect by oil Trans National Corporations (TNCs), it snowballed into revolutionary violence in response to the state's use of violence to quell locals' discontent (Ibeanu & Luckham, 2006; Hunsaker-Clark, 2007; Owugah, 2009; Small Arms Survey, 2007; Nwankpa, 2015). The violence that ensued resulted in the kidnap over 350 persons with over ₦6 billion paid as ransom to militants (*THISDAY*, May 20, 2009, p. 21) and over 1000 deaths and a loss of about ₦8.84 trillion oil revenue between 2006 and 2008 (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009).

But the militants under the auspices of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) say they are not "criminals" (*The Nation*, March 18, 2010, p. 15) but "freedom fighters" who are fighting "a war of emancipation and not for self-aggrandisement..." (*The Nation*, Oct. 21, 2007, p. 8). Yet their modus operandi, by Schmid & Longmann (1988, p. 5) definitional elements of terrorism—"violence, force, fear, terror emphasised, purposive, planned, systematic, organised crime; method of combat, strategy, tactic; extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints; intimidation and Publicity— link them with terrorism, even though they have not been designated as terrorists by any formal institution. Their terror tactics included kidnapping, attacks on oil installations, oil bunkering, killings, hijacking of oil vessels and planes, car bombing, violent demand for compensation, among others. Consequent upon these acts of terror, the media was awash with stories of militancy in the Niger Delta during the period covered in the study. A cursory check indicates the print media in particular devoted enormous spaces to this coverage. The present study revisits the issue of terror in the Niger Delta under the guise of "a war of emancipation" as the militants themselves describe it. It does so by exploring how four Nigerian newspapers reported on the terror tactics of militants and the cost of terror to Nigeria within the study period of 2006 to 2009.

### **Reporting on Terror**

There is a broad consensus that there exists a somewhat "symbiotic relationship" between terrorism and the media. Terrorism supplies sensational and horrifying stories which aid the media in selling the news, and in return, the media provides terrorist organisations with an outlet for circulating their message and causing fear and panic among the population. Many critics believe that media coverage encourages terrorists by supplying what former British PM Margaret Thatcher described as "the oxygen of publicity" (as quoted in Wilkinson, 2000, p. 175) on which terrorism thrives. Three universal objectives have been identified why terrorists (and militants in the Niger

Delta) commit violent acts: to attract attention; to sell their cause; and to secure a certain degree of respectability and legitimacy (Alexander, Carlton & Wilkinson, 1979). However, Hoffman (2006) states that there is no link between media coverage of terrorism and public sympathy for terrorists or their cause. For instance, the RAND Corporation reported that even with prolonged media coverage of terrorist acts, public endorsement was almost absent (Downes-Le Guin & Hoffman, 1993).

This notwithstanding, terrorists have always pursued their objectives relying heavily on the media in the hope that media channels would help amplify their message and depict the impotence of national governments to contain terrorism. In a bid to sell the news, the media could play into the booby trap of terrorists by over focusing on the sensational, which terrorists and their operations supply in great doses. Inadvertently, the media could find itself serving terrorists' cause. Some have argued that to make complete sense of the full horror of terrorism, the story should be told in full. But it is difficult to sustain this argument in the current digital times, where citizens have access to various online platforms for news and information. Citizens' right to know would not be harmed if mainstream media learns to avoid sensationalism in reporting about terrorism, even as research evidence has shown that reporting on an act of terror enhances the chances of another one taking place (Jetter, 2014). It is important, therefore, for the media to consider the scale, content (Beckett, 2016) and angle of terror stories to project. It is in this wise that the BBC should be commended for refusing to circulate ISIS propaganda in 2016. When the terror organisation released videos showing children killing captives, the BBC refused to publish these videos for two reasons: first, because of consideration for minors and because it did not want to encourage ISIS to create more outrageous videos (Beckett, 2016). Even though terrorists have been very successful at using the media to attract public attention and to spread anxiety and fear within the populace, any kind of media censorship as regards covering terrorism will encounter two main challenges: "normative and practical." On the normative front, Wilkinson argues:

It is widely recognised that it is important to avoid the mass media being hijacked and manipulated by terrorists, but if the freedom of the media is sacrificed in the name of combating terrorism one has allowed small groups of terrorists to destroy one of the key foundations of a democratic society. It is an insult to the intelligence of the general public, and would totally undermine confidence in the very veracity of the media if censorship was to be introduced (Wilkinson, 2002, p. 185).

Agreed there is some form of media censorship in every society, placing a ban on media coverage of terrorism is incompatible with core democratic tenets of many nations. The people's right to know would be curtailed. The second hindrance to media censorship has to do with the feasibility of such a policy. With the avalanche of social media networks and other channels of communication available to the general public and the availability of smart phones to billions across the world, such a policy is

unlikely to succeed. Citizens are now content creators, reporting their own experiences via blogs, email and other social media platforms. Terrorist organisations have also mastered the act of using the Internet to tell their own stories uncensored by anyone (Tsfati & Weimann, 2002; Nwankpa, 2011; Conway, 2017). Several terrorist organisations, including Boko Haram terrorising Nigeria and other sub-Saharan African states, maintain online presence.

There is the fear that media blackout on terrorist attacks might create more frightening rumours than actual media coverage, and the possibility of terrorists escalating violence (Fedler *et al* 2005). From an ethical perspective, coverage of terrorism can be risky. Journalists are often in a quandary on how to provide an accurate account of events within a context that promotes understanding while not escalating fear and panic (Day, 2006). Spencer (2012, pp. 16–17) has identified two kinds of metaphors often used in media framing of terrorism: “War metaphors and metaphors of ‘evilness.’” War metaphors portray terrorism as a war, and include “war on terror” or “war against terrorism,” “acts of war,” “battles,” “sieges,” “warzones,” “terror warlords,” and “suicide squads.” The metaphors of “evilness” are exemplified through metaphors which describe terrorists as “possessed,” “evil,” “hydras,” “monstrous” and their sponsors as “Axis of Evil,” consequently fusing into one the metaphors of war and evilness. As Spencer further observes:

The terrorist is described as an “inhuman” “monster with “tentacles” spread around the globe; these “subhuman” “evil beasts” “without a soul are said to have spun a “web of evil.” They are unrivalled in “wickedness” and their “doomsday attacks” created an “inferno” and “hell” on earth likened to “Armageddon or the “Apocalypse.” (Spencer 2012, 18–19).

Nwankpa (2011, pp. 119–120) has also identified the use of evil metaphors in reporting militancy in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region: “errant youth in the Niger Delta,” “separatist agitators,” and “suicide bombers.” Similarly, Ekwueme & Obayi (2012, p. 7) have canvassed that the Nigerian media “frame Boko Haram appropriately and rightly as faceless, conscienceless and bloody bunch of mass-murdering terrorists bent on ruining the country with their nihilistic demands.” As Shimko (1994, p. 655) points out, “metaphors in the media shape the public’s general approach to an issue as they inform and reflect the conceptual foundation of a phenomenon such as terrorism and thereby making certain policies acceptable while others remain outside the option considered appropriate.” Similarly, Lazar & Lazar (2004) remark that the use of metaphors (war metaphors and evil metaphors) polarises and as a result, escalates public fear. According to them, metaphors ostracise the actor and their actions and dehumanises and attacks them (the out-group) and us (the in-group). But Spencer (2012) argues that metaphors can be used to cognitively convey some comprehension to the populace. They carry certain assumptions. As a counter-terrorism measure, the media should frame terrorism in a less fear-inducing way. This can be done through

the use of metaphors that portray terrorism in a certain way by playing up certain attributes and de-emphasising others. Portraying it this way helps diminish the fear media coverage can induce. Furthermore, journalists have been called upon to mediate the emotional impact of terror on the audience. Stories at this time of trauma should incorporate the memorial services, the vigils and the outpour of condolences. As Beckett points out:

By showing this process of grieving, the news media helps communities recover from trauma. By focusing on the victims rather than the perpetrators, journalists can bring humanity and dignity back into a narrative of destruction and fear. ... Humanising terror victims and their communities may be the best counter-extremist measure media can provide (Beckett, 2016, pp. 46–47).

While reporting on terror, care must be taken in applying the word “terrorist” as not all acts of terror are committed by terrorists. According to Beckett (2016, p. 32), “language matters because it conditions the public acceptance; for example, of negotiations with extremist groups as political or military actors.” Not many people would want to negotiate with terrorists. Vague terms must be avoided. It calls for factual reporting in concrete and accurate language.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Reflective-projective Theory**

The theory, which was proposed by Lee Loevinger, posits that the media “mirror” society and that images in the media often reflect society’s attitudes and values at a given epoch in human history. In the same vein, audience members project their own individual reflections into media images, resulting in audience differential interpretation of the media mirror. The theory points out the inherent distortions in the media mirror, given the slant peculiar to each media organisation in the gate keeping process (Loevinger, 1968).

As regards the present study, what most people knew about militancy in the Niger Delta at the time was mostly through mediated images. People’s experience of the world around them is to a large degree shaped by media images, in line with the media’s surveillance function. Given that militancy was not a media creation and by the theory’s assumption, the media, in this case, Nigerian newspapers, only reflected the mood of the Nigerian society at the time to her audiences. Newspapers were, therefore, awash with tales of terror that enmeshed Nigeria as a result of militancy.

### **Methodology**

Quantitative and qualitative content analysis were employed in the study to analyse four Nigerian newspaper coverage of the terror tactics used by Niger Delta militants to prosecute their war on the Nigerian state between 2006 and 2009. The newspapers were purposively selected based on the following criteria: national spread; consistency of

coverage of the Niger Delta crisis and wide availability. They are the *Thisday*, *The Guardian*, the *Vanguard* and *The Sun*. Within the study period, the total editions of the four dailies published and circulated totaled 5,532.

The study covers approximately a period of four years, spanning from January 1, 2006 to October 4, 2009, the day the period of grace provided by the Nigerian government for Niger Delta militants to embrace government's offer of amnesty elapsed. The systematic sampling technique was used in selecting the editions of each newspaper to be studied. From January 1, 2006 to October 4, 2009, the total editions of the four dailies published were 5,532. However, 10% of this population was studied and this amounted to 553 issues. Approximately, each of the four newspapers yielded 138 issues of the sample. A skip interval of 10 was adopted, which was obtained by dividing the population (5,532) by the sample size (553). Using the skip interval of 10, an issue was picked using the calendar for the years studied. To introduce randomness into the selection process, the starting point was often varied across the different months in each year. The units of analysis for the study are straight news, feature articles and editorials that focused on militancy in the Niger Delta. From coding, the following content categories on the terror tactics of militants emerged: Kidnapping, vandalism of oil facilities/oil bunkering, killing, violent demand for compensation, hijacking, others. They are briefly explained as follows:

- **Kidnapping:** Kidnapping means the taking of hostage of individuals by militants in the Niger Delta as a political bargaining tool and for ransom.
- **Vandalism of oil Facilities/Oil Bunkering:** Vandalism is the blowing up of oil facilities to cause a loss of government revenue while oil bunkering is the tapping of pipelines and wellheads to steal crude oil. Often, vandalism precedes bunkering; hence, the two were treated together in the study.
- **Killing:** This is the destruction of lives which results from shoot-outs between militants and security forces in the Niger Delta. In some cases, killing is the result of a victim struggling to resist being kidnapped, security forces trying to rescue hostages from militants, or the hostage attempting to escape. Killing can also be the outcome of militants shooting to enable them to invade a location as was the case in January 2006 when militants reportedly attacked the operational base of Agip in Port Harcourt, killed nine persons, and reportedly made away with ₦5 million (*The Beacon*, Jan. 27–Feb. 2, 2006).
- **Violent demand for Compensation:** This entails staging violent demonstrations by Niger Delta militants to compel oil firms to pay compensations to host communities. It could take the form of sealing off premises of oil firms leading to disruption of work. To be considered violent, a form of bodily harm or death must be involved.
- **Hijacking:** It is taking control of tankers, vessels and planes operating on behalf of oil transnationals in the Niger Delta and forcing them to an unscheduled destination. This heightens concerns for the safety of crew members while

militants reportedly demand ransom as a condition for the release of the hijacked item and those on board.

- Others

This represents other forms of terror tactics not among the above listed content categories.

Inter-coder reliability was 0.87 using Scott's pi. index. This is within the acceptable range (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis to establish frequencies for RQ1 (What terror tactics were reported in news coverage of militancy in the Niger Delta?), while qualitative analysis was used to resolve RQ2, relying on explanation building; while answering RQ2 (What is the impact of militancy on the Nigerian state as reported in the dailies and in select documents?) in addition to the dailies studied, two editions of a Nigerian news magazine, the *Newswatch* (of May 4, 2009 and July 26, 2010), were purposively selected and studied because of their in-depth reporting of the impact of terror on Nigeria. The International Crisis Group Report No. 118 (2006) was specifically included to highlight the cost of terror not captured in the reports of the Nigerian newspapers and magazine studied.

### **Results and Discussion of Findings**

Five main content categories were used to analyse the terror tactics of Niger Delta militants reported by the four dailies from 2006 to 2009. From figure 1, kidnapping was the most reported terror tactic; 50% of reports on terror tactics centred on kidnapping, suggesting that it must have been the most utilised terror tactic by militants in the Niger Delta. Kidnapping is said to have started in Nigeria in the 1990s (Chatham House, 2006) but by February 2007, it had assumed the status of a "booming business" (BBC, 2007) in the Niger Delta, earning for Nigeria in 2008 the sixth position among the 10 worst countries in the world where people could be easily kidnapped (*Newswatch*, July 26, 2010, p. 17). In the Niger Delta, many believe that it is a tool in the hands of militants to attract global attention to the Niger Delta agitation for justice, resource control and self-determination as established by a 2007 Small Arms Survey (SAS, p. 69): "Groups in the Niger Delta have used the kidnapping of international oil workers to raise international attention regarding the plight of those living in the Delta; the environmental damage caused by oil spills and the oil industry and the demand for more local ownership of the extraction of natural resources."

Given the grave concerns for hostage's safety, Niger Delta militants were able to draw global attention to themselves, especially through media coverage because each case was usually sensationalised in such a way that it would attract media worldwide, creating panic and fear in the families and home countries of the hostages (*Newswatch*, July 26, 2010). As Ramachandran (2006) observes, "by reaching out to a global audience, militants have been able to amplify many times over the terror generated by a single incident of kidnapping..." (as quoted in Dode 2007, p. 166). And Niger Delta militants exploited this technique to good advantage by posting brazen

warnings as well as pictures of hostages in their custody on the internet. In many cases, they did send e-mail messages to journalists and media organisations about their exploits and next line of action. Incessant cases of kidnapping compelled many Western countries to raise security alarm, warning their nationals to leave the Niger Delta region or reduce their movement (Anonymous 2006; 2007). Many international oil and construction companies fled the region during the study period citing security concerns, leading to flight in foreign direct investments.

Another terror tactic the militants used to prosecute their war was through vandalism of oil facilities and oil bunkering. It was reported 55 times representing 20.60%, second to kidnapping (figure 1). To siphon off crude, pipelines are often vandalised. It is estimated that there are over 7,000 km of pipelines, 600 oil fields and 5,000 oil wells in the Niger Delta (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007).

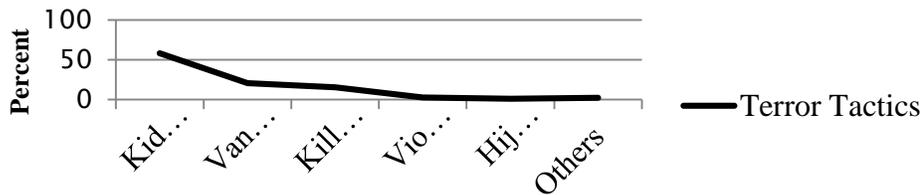
Reports indicate that oil bunkering in Nigeria is an organised business involving the militants, NNPC officials, Nigerian security forces, top government officials and their foreign collaborators. A 2002 special security committee set up by the Nigerian government (cited by the International Crisis Group, ICG, 2006, p. 8) uncovered “a cartel or mafia” who “run a network of agents to steal crude oil and finished products from pipelines in the Niger Delta region.” Militant leaders insist that oil bunkering would not have been possible without the collaboration of the Nigerian security forces. They claim that military personnel escort vessels and tanker trucks conveying siphoned oil or allow them to pass established checkpoints (ICG, 2006; SAS, 2007).

Illegal oil bunkering has been described as a money-spinning venture. An estimate put the annual earnings accruing from it at USD 1–4 billion (Lubeck, Watts & Lipschutz, 2007). Reports by both the International Crisis Group (2006) and the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey (2007) showed that oil bunkering is a key source of funds for militants. It supplies the needed funds to procure more lethal weapons and, in some instances, there are indications that stolen oil may have been exchanged by militants directly for weapons (Davis *et al.*, 2006; BBC, 2007). Killing, another terror tactic, was reported 41 times representing 15.36 per cent of the total coverage of the content categories (figure 1). Its low score relative to kidnapping and vandalism of oil facilities/bunkering is an indication that Niger Delta militants rarely kill their victims. Their interest seems to centre more on the international attention they draw to their struggle through kidnapping and the ransom reportedly paid to them to secure the release of hostages than killing their victims. Reports indicate that although some hostages have been harmed—death or injuries were as a result of “rescue attempts by the Nigerian military or at the time of kidnapping” and “not as a result of intentional shooting” (SAS, 2007, p. 69) by militants. Perhaps, Niger Delta militants may belong to the order of “old terrorists” as their tendencies have shown. Jenkins (1977) states that “old terrorists” crave more for attention; they do not want many people dead. In contrast, “New terrorists” embark on a mass murdering mission (Lanquer, 1999; Simon

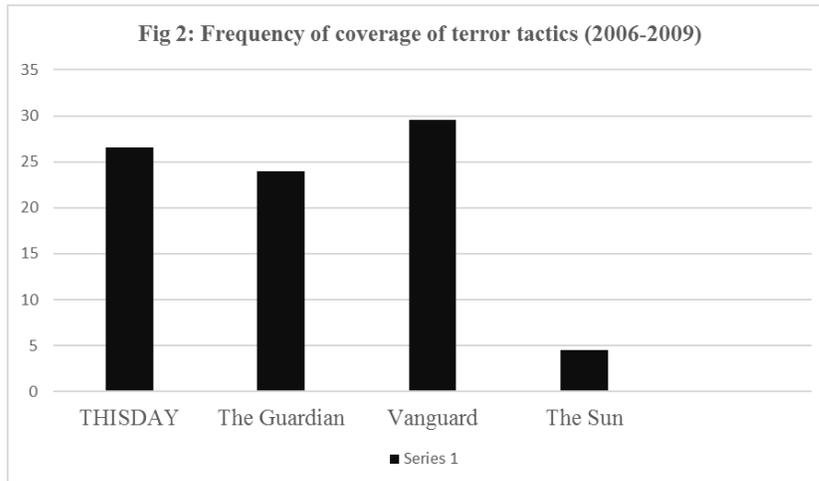
& Benjamin, 2000; Kurtulus, 2011). Suicide bombers belong to the “new” terrorist sect.

In figure 2, the *Vanguard* printed most of the terror tactics of Niger militants (29.59%), followed by the *THISDAY* (26.59%). Both papers provided more than half of the coverage of terror tactics of militants. Coverage of terror spiked in 2006 (figure 3), suggesting it could have been the worst year for Nigeria during the four-year period covered in the study.

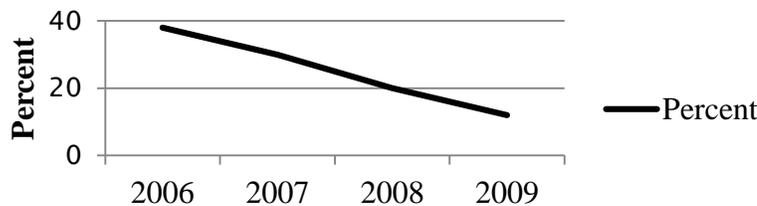
**Fig 1: Terror Tactics**



**Fig 2: Frequency of coverage of terror tactics (2006-2009)**



**Fig 3: Annual Coverage of Terror Tactics**



Even though it is difficult to capture fully the devastating impact of militancy on the Nigerian state in a single study, results of our content analyses indicate that between 2006 and 2009 over 350 people were kidnapped in Nigeria with over ₦6 billion paid as ransom to kidnappers (*THISDAY*, May 20, 2009). When MEND attacked and destroyed three major pipelines in Bayelsa State May 8, 2007, it was estimated that Nigeria incurred a loss of 170,000bpd from that incident alone (*THISDAY*, May 9,

2007). In the heat of the crisis, the Nigerian Government lamented it was losing 1000,000 bpd of crude oil to militancy in the Niger Delta. This translates to ₦8.7 billion daily going by USD 60 per barrel, while a daily loss of 200 million square cubic feet of gas was being recorded, according to figures released by the Nigerian Gas Company in 2009 (*Daily Sun*, May 25, 2009).

The *Newswatch* of May 4, 2009 (citing the Ledum Mitee Technical Committee on the Niger Delta) reports that when gunmen believed to be militants attacked an oil facility belonging to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) offshore EA field in Rivers State January 11, 2006 and kidnapped four expatriate oil workers, the country lost 120,000 bpd to the incident and another loss of 100,000 bpd the same day to a similar attack on a major crude oil pipeline in the Forcados, Delta State. The magazine added that on January 16, 2007 militants attacked an oil vessel near the Bonny Island, Rivers State. Nigeria lost 187,000 bpd. The attack caused a major spill March 6, 2007 at a pipeline feeding the Bonny export terminal, which resulted in a loss of 150,000 bpd. In the first nine months of 2008, the report further shows that Nigeria lost an estimated revenue of about ₦2.97 trillion or USD 20.7 billion to attacks on oil installations resulting in shutdowns and spillages. This figure is different from another estimated ₦430 billion or USD 3 billion lost to oil bunkering within the first seven months of 2008. This puts the total losses within this period at ₦3.4 trillion or USD 23.7 billion (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009).

Militants blew off two Agip oil rigs in the Forcados, Delta State, April 8, 2008. Eleven soldiers were reportedly killed while 120,000 bpd was lost. The attacks on Agip did not abate as Agip vessels were bombed April 13 that year. Ten naval officers and some militants died in that incident. Again, over 100 deaths occurred when MEND struck SPDC's Bonga facilities on deep offshore oil fields in Rivers June 19, 2008 (*Newswatch*, May 4, 2009). Also, according to a *Newswatch* report, in 2006 alone, 72 foreigners and 56 Nigerians were kidnapped. Fifty-seven foreigners and 10 Nigerians were held by kidnappers while at least 15 people were killed between January and March, 2007 (July 26, 2010).

The International Crisis Group (2006) reported that in April 2006 MEND launched two car bombings in April 2006. According to the Group, one wasted many civilian lives outside a military barracks in Port Harcourt and the other was detonated in a queue of petroleum tanker trucks outside the Warri refinery. In sum, the terror unleashed on Nigeria by Niger Delta militants resulted in the loss of lives, environmental pollution, destruction of oil installations, drastic fall in oil revenue, financial losses to government, crippling of the Nigerian economy, flight in foreign direct investments, embarrassments to the Nigerian government, poor international image, increased security spending by the government, and foisting of a blanket of insecurity, terror and fear over Nigeria, among others.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study has established Nigerian newspaper coverage terror tactics of Niger Delta militants. It has also attempted to capture the cost of terror to the Nigerian state even though it is difficult to document in totality the cost terror to Nigeria in one study. Findings showed that a group not formally designated as "terrorist" can commit acts of terror in such a horrific scale for which terrorist organisations are known for. Since

what most people know about global events, including terror, is via mediated images, it is recommended that the media be mindful of what it reflects in order not to escalate tension or depict the impotence of constituted authorities to tackle terror. Coverage that glamorises acts of terror is inimical to society. In line with the theoretical framework, what is required is responsible journalism that chooses the angle to mirror and the scale to project, while giving prominence to the widespread public condemnation that always trails such acts, and efforts by the authorities to restore normal life again after terror merchants have done their evil.

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