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Amnesty and the Challenge of Militancy in the Niger Delta: How Far, Thusfar?

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Abstract

Deprivation evidenced in the spate of environmental degradation, lack of social amenities and the quest for resource control was the basis upon which militia groups were formed in the Niger Delta region. The attendant ramifications were evident in heightened insecurity, such as, the kidnap of expatriate oil workers, vandalization of oil pipe lines, among others. Following the adoption of the amnesty programme by late President Musa Yar'Adua in 2009, which sought to bring an end to the continued agitations in the region, by empowering repentant militants, the region has arguably enjoyed relative peace. The study interrogated the amnesty programme with the objective of ascertaining the extent to which the policy has addressed the challenge of militancy among other challenges in the region. A total of 15 purposively selected respondents which comprised indigenes and relatives of ex-militants from the Niger Delta region, personnel of oil corporation, military personnel, government officials, journalists and academics were interviewed. The study concluded that rather than address the spate of militancy and its attendant ramifications, the amnesty programme has arguably birthed new militia groups in the region while the challenges in the region remains unabated. The study recommended that the provisions of the 2014 National Conference and the All Progressive Congress (APC) Committee on political restructuring which allows the States' control their resources be adopted. Also, leaders and government representatives in the Niger Delta regions should be held accountable for the utilization of the resources in the region.

Keywords: Insecurity, Militancy, Niger Delta, Political Restructuring, Resource Control.

Introduction

The rise of militancy in the Niger Delta region arguably came up in protest against environmental degradation, lack of basic social amenities, and control over crude oil replete in the region. There is no gain saying that oil export accounts for over 80% of foreign exchange earnings for the Nigerian state, especially, since its discovery in commercial quantities in Oloibiri, present day Bayelsa in 1956 (NNPC,

2020). While the discovery of crude oil was expected to yield good returns through proper management, such that, it contributes immensely to the development of the region where it is sourced, and advance the country's economy, reverse has been the case for the local communities. The challenges are traceable to the hazards associated with oil exploration in the Niger Delta region and the negligence of past and present government to proffer workable solutions in that regards (Adebanjoko, 2006). The United Nations Development Programme (2006), reports that an estimated 1.89 barrels of petroleum were spilled into the waterways in the Niger Delta between 1976 and 1996; and about 6,817 barrels between 1976 to 2001. Further, Amnesty International (2009), reports that there is a gross humanitarian crisis in the region evidenced in oil spillage which has left farmers and rural dwellers with no source of livelihood and access to potable water.

It is noteworthy that the conflict in the region which pits the people of the Niger Delta region against the federal government, on the one hand, and oil corporations on the other hand, has been in existence since the 1960s. Hence, Osungade (2008:1) notes that:

Conflict in the Niger Delta arose in the early 1960s due to tensions between the foreign oil corporations and indigenes of the Niger- Delta region which constitute the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria. The conflict is premised on the stance that the people were being exploited and their lands degraded environmentally; particularly the Ogoni and Ijaw communities.

Kenule Beeson, an indigene of Ogoni land, otherwise referred to as 'Ken Saro-Wiwa', was an environmentalist and activist, who until his execution alongside nine Ogoni chieftains in the hands of the Military Government of General Sanni Abacha in 1995; was at the forefront of agitation against the disregard for the yearnings of the people by the military government and oil corporations in Ogoni land and by extension, the Niger Delta region. This led to his establishing of a social movement- Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990 with the objectives of fighting for the indigenous rights of the Ogoni people (The Guardian, 2010). It is noteworthy that Ogoni land is averred to be the worst hit, in terms of environmental pollution evidenced by oil exploration in the Niger Delta. While explaining the reasons behind the formation of MOSOP, Saro-Wiwa submits that:

The Ogoni country has been completely destroyed by the search for oil. Oil spillages, and general pollution accompany the exploration of crude oil. Oil companies have flared gas in Nigeria for the past thirty years, causing acid rain. Hence, what used to be the food basket of the Delta has now become totally infertile. All one sees and feels around is death. Environmental degradation has become a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous Ogoni people (Nixon, 1996).

Ethnic and political unrest in the region continued throughout the 1990s and persisted following the return to democratic rule in 1999. Resource control and the quest to have the government come through with its promise of making the region safe for agricultural purposes, provision of jobs opportunities among other social benefits, remained the factors that triggered violence in the region, thereby, causing the militarization of nearly the entire region by militia groups, the Nigerian Military and the Police Force (Ogunbiade, 2008). Despite the vast wealth created from the abundance of petroleum in

that region, much of the Niger Delta region is characterized by widespread poverty, youth unemployment, political underrepresentation, and environmental degradation. These issues contributed to the outbreak of violence between 2006 through 2016, spearheaded by militia groups - Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC), the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSEIN), and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in the region (Freedom, 2016; Ikechukwu and Marshall, 2017).

The militia groups engaged in activities that heightened insecurity in the region vis-à-vis oil-siphoning, bombing of oil-pipelines and facilities, and kidnap of oil workers for ransom. These attacks were undertaken under the code name "Operation Red the Economy", hinged on destabilizing the country's economy largely dependent on crude oil export (Ikechukwu and Marshall, 2017). Accordingly, Ibaba (2008) notes that two crucial issues which precipitated the Niger Delta crisis are yet to be addressed despite the adoption of the amnesty programme. First, is the feeling of alienation by the leaders and people in the region. Second, the demand for resource control which marked the foundation upon which the Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990); the Kaiama Declaration (1998); the Bill of Rights of the Oron People (1999); Resolutions of the First Urhobo Economic Summit (1998); the Aklaka Declaration (1999) and the Warri Accord (1999) were drafted (Idiba, 2008).

An excerpt of the Ogoni Bill of Right of 1990 reads:

The Ogoni people should be granted political autonomy. The autonomy provided should guarantee the right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development (Idaba, 2008:13).

The Kaiama Declaration (1998) states:

All land and natural resources within the Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival. We cease to recognize all undemocratic decrees that rob our people/communities of the right to ownership and control of their lives (Idaba, 2008:13).

The thrust of the paper is to interrogate the amnesty programme with the objectives of ascertaining the extent to which it has addressed the activities of militia groups among other challenges in the region.

Origin of the Niger Delta Crisis

The Niger Delta area is one of the world's largest wetlands, and Africa's largest delta, covering some 70,000 km² in the south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria (World Bank 1995:1). It lies within the Ibo Plateau and the Cross River Valley (Willinks Commission Report 1957:9). Further, people of the Niger Delta, constitutes the minority groups in Nigeria, in terms of numeric strength, compared to the three majority ethnic groups of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa

It is noteworthy that the major oil-producing states in Nigeria include; Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Edo, Delta, Imo, Rivers and Ondo States (Tamuno 2000:12; Mathew, 2015:6). However, for the study, the Niger Delta region will comprise Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers states. The study areas were selected, in that, they witnessed high rate of hostility following the rise of militancy in the region.

Following the discovery of crude oil in Nigeria, as well as events that birthed Nigeria's independence on October 1st, 1960, the federal structure of the country, gave the regional governments of the then, West, North, East and the Mid-Western region the power to control resources in the disparate regions. Consequently, royalties were paid to the federal government. The federal structure allowed the regions the leverage to compete in terms of resource exploration and revenue generation meant for the development of the regions. The resultant impact was evident in massive groundnut and cotton cultivation in the Northern region, oil palm in the East, arts and craft in the West, and crude oil exploration in the Mid-Western region. Ozoigbo (2008), notes that the federal structure in Nigeria's First Republic was attractive and seemingly organised. The reason is that, the arrangement gave the regional governments the privilege to govern and develop at their own phase without interference from the centre. The country was at its peak in terms of infrastructural and economic development. However, military incursion in the country's political space returned the country to unitary system. The attendant ramifications were witnessed in the total control of the state by the military government.

In the views of Owugah (1999:5-8), the origin of the crisis in the Niger Delta region started in the 1980s and as evolved over time; pitting the people of the region against oil corporations. Therefore, the people employed legal measures at addressing the crisis, demanding compensation for damages done due to oil exploration. The second phase involved the use of peaceful demonstrations and occupation of oil facilities and stations with the objectives of getting the oil companies to fulfill their promises to provide basic social amenities to the region, which includes creating employment opportunities for indigenes in the areas (Owugah, 1999). The use of military and police action by management of the oil corporation escalated the crisis. In response, the indigenes formed militia groups who engaged in activities such as the occupation, shut down and destruction of oil facilities, seizure of tug boats and other vessels belonging to the oil companies (Owugah, 1999).

Similarly, Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2017), submits that conflict in the Niger Delta area had existed long before and after Nigeria's independence. As early as the 1960s, there were protests against the marginalisation in the region championed by Adaka Boro. Isaac Adaka Boro led a campaign against the federal government in protest against the continued exploitation of resources in the region and as such, clamoured for an increased revenue sharing formula for the people of the region. This led to the formation of an armed militia group under aegis of the Delta Volunteer Service (DVS), which comprised persons of Ijaw-descent. It is noteworthy that the group declared a Republic of Niger Delta on the 23rd of February, 1966. However, their aspirations of the group were futile following their arrest and imprisonment for treason. Albeit the revolt was resisted by the government, it had put into the consciousness of the people of the Niger Delta, the need to fight for the control of the resources replete in the region (Ikechukwu and Marshall, 2017).

This evolved to the early 1990s, when the people of Ogoni land adopted non-violent means to protest against the degradation of their environment due to oil explorations carried out by oil corporations. This triggered the formation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) founded in 1992 by Ken Saro-Wiwo, who applied non-violent means to advance the rights of people of Ogoni and by extension, people of the Niger Delta. However, the failure of the government to heed to the series of protests, including the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa who was at the forefront of the agitations, heightened restiveness in the region.

Further, Bekoe, (2005: 5) and Ibeanu (2006:9), note that the embers of violence in the Niger Delta region were fanned into flames during the build up to the 2003 general election. Public office seekers in Rivers State manipulated groups like the Niger Delta Vigilantes (NDV), led by Ateke Tom, and the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Alhaji Asari Dokubo to advance their political aspirations during elections, rewarding gang members with cash sums and weapons to cast fear and intimidate political opponents. This witnessed the emergence of other militia groups, such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), and the Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF) which unleashed mayhem in the region.

From the positions expressed above, it may be deduced that the rise of militia groups, protest and clamour for resource control, as well as the downside of oil exploration evident by environmental degradation, among other challenges were birthed at the discovery of crude oil in the region and as such, existed side by side prior and after the independence of the Nigerian state.

Theoretical Framework and Analysis

The paper adopts resource curse theory as the theoretical basis to examine the rationale behind the rise of militancy in the Niger Delta region. The resource curse theory is otherwise referred to as the paradox of plenty. Resource control explains why countries or regions replete with natural resources are prone to conflict and are seemingly underdeveloped. The paradox, in this regard, is reflected in the position that a country with abundance of natural resources such as fossil fuels among other natural resources tend to have less economic growth and development outcomes than countries with small amounts of natural resources at their disposal (Venables, 2016). Resource curse was said to be first used by Richard Auty in 1993, as a means to describe how countries rich in mineral resources were unable to judiciously use the wealth at their disposal to boost their economies. Hence, these countries are often the hub of violent conflict which pits the people against their government (Venables, 2016).

The existence of natural resources in a state may trigger in-fighting between individuals and groups over resource exploration and revenue allocation. The conflict may be between militia groups, the people and government ministries or agencies (Gray and Kaufman, 1998). In the same vein, Bell and Scott (2015), argues that oil discovery and exploitation makes violent clashes more likely in the regions where they are explored. For instance, oil exploration and revenue allocation have the potential to alter the balance of power between regimes and their opponents, rendering bargains an impossible feat to achieve. Similarly, Ross (1999), argues that only petroleum resources pose as the resource that has been consistently associated with countries with less democracy and worse institutions. The position of Ross is seemingly shrouded in ambiguity, in that, some countries like the United States and Canada, that rank high among oil producing states in the world, boasts of strong institutions and have the principles of democracy engrained in their society. Further, World Watch (2012), notes that resource curse theory also bears within it, the tendency for corrupt members of national governments to collude with resource extraction companies to override their own laws and ignore socio-economic concerns of persons or groups living in communities where the resources are sourced.

Resource curse theory provides explanation to the advent of militia groups in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. Expectedly, the discovery and exploration of crude oil in the regions are meant to bring about some degree of development in the region, such as, reduced youth unemployment, access to potable water and schools, among other social amenities. On the contrary, the people of the region averred that they are being marginalized. The attendant ramifications of oil exploration, on the one hand, and the agitation of the people of the region, on the other hand, are evidenced in environmental degradation;

clamour for resource control as well as the birth of different militia groups who engage in destruction of oil pipelines/facilities, kidnap of personnel of oil corporation as well as the demand for secession.

Government Intervention Programmes in the Niger Delta Region

The section examines the policies adopted by the Nigerian government to address the challenges associated with the region since the discovery of crude oil in the South-Southern region of the country. It is noteworthy that at the event of oil discovery in the country, prior to and after the country's independence, various intervention programme and policies were put in place to address the issues that birthed restiveness and violence in the Niger Delta region.

Sir Henry Willink Commission of 1957, instituted by the British Colonial Government, and charged with the responsibility of allaying the fears of minority groups in Nigeria was the first policy adopted to address concerns over revenue management and allocation in the Niger Delta region and by extension, the Nigeria. While the Commission made recommendations which include among others the creation of the mid-west region, established in 1963, the Commission also established the Niger Delta Development Board (Jack-Aigbe and Okouwa, 2013).

Between 1979 and 1983, President Shehu Shagari administration's that returned Nigeria to democratic rule following 18 years of what may be termed the 'first phase' of military incursion in Nigeria's political space, established the Presidential Task Force on 1.5% Derivation for the oil-producing regions in the country (Suberu, 2003).

By 1987, the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida established the Presidential Implementation Committee as a substitute for the already existing Presidential Task Force. Occasioned by the failure of the existing Presidential Implementation Committee to ameliorate the yearnings and plights of the people in the Niger Delta region, the Oil Minerals Areas Producing Development Commission (OMPADEC) was established concurrently in the year 1992 (Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, 2018).

At the instance of the 'second phase' of events that heralded the return to civil rule in 1999, making it a total of 33 years of military involvement in Nigeria's politics, President Olusegun Obasanjo in the year 2000, signed into law, the bill that established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC).

It is noteworthy that the aforementioned policies, agencies and ministry established by the said government administrations failed in all its totality to address the challenges and demands of the people in the region. The resultant effects were visible in underdevelopment, agitation for secession, resource control, restiveness, piracy and violence that characterized the region.

The Amnesty Programme

Given the activities of militia groups on Nigeria's economy and on the lives and property of people in the region, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, announced in the year 2009, as part of his administration's seven-point agenda, an amnesty programme targeted at militia groups in the region. The amnesty policy was the government's effort towards bringing enduring peace, security, stability and development in the region (Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017). Hence., the President offered unconditional pardon and a vocational and education programme for agitators who agreed to lay down their arms and embrace peace (Xan, 2009). The amnesty programme targeted around 10,000 militants whose activities in Bayelsa, Rivers, and Delta states, had cost the country a third of its oil production revenue (Xan, 2009).

Further, as part of the amnesty programme, the charges levelled against Henry Okah, the leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) were dropped (Sahara Reporters, 2009); leaders of ex-militia groups like Alhaji Asari Dokubo, Tompolo Ekpemupolo, Ebikabowei Victor

Ben and Ateke Tom were said to have been paid several millions of dollars to have their men 'guard' the pipelines they once laid siege on (Oscar, 2013). Accordingly, Timiebi Koripamo-Agary, one-time spokesperson for the Amnesty Committee was quoted that have opined about the amnesty programme thus:

A lot of militia groups have indicated interest at embracing the offer put forward by the government under the aegis of the Amnesty Programme. Arms collection centres are now open, but I think members of the groups will observe to ascertain the authenticity of the policy before they act (Xan, 2009:1).

Also core to the amnesty programme was the institutionalization of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs on September 10, 2008. The ministry was charged with several objectives which include among others:

- a. formulate policies and programmes for youth mobilization and empowerment in the region;
- b. advise the government on security concerns in the region;
- c. formulate and coordinate policies for environmental management in the region;
- d. liaise with host communities for the enhancement of the welfare of the people and development of the region etc. (Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, 2018).

Amnesty Programme and the Challenge of Militancy in the Niger Delta

In a bid to examine the above objectives, different scholars hold different views. For instance, Gideon¹, who double as a journalist whose news reports and features covers events and happenings in the Niger Delta averred that:

The Amnesty programme, at inception, went a long way in calming the restiveness in the region. Recently, however, there have been some rumblings over the management of the problem, especially with selection of beneficiaries and issues with gainful employment for graduates of the scheme at the end of the programme. As it concerns resource control and environmental, the amnesty programme faltered in the regards.

Jay² opines that the programme drew the attention of the Federal Government to the plights of the indigenous communities in the region adversely affected by oil extraction such as- destruction of local livelihoods and severe environmental pollution. He furthered that the programme caused the Government to create platforms for skills acquisition, job creation, education for youths within the Nigeria Delta regions. However, the amnesty programme has failed to address the environmental degradation and region marginalization in the region.

Also, an Anonymous³ respondent and personnel of an oil corporation in the region, argues that militancy and its attendant consequences are carried out as a business venture, and not as a protest against environmental degradation. He furthered that:

The amnesty programme has to an extent disarmed militia groups in the region. Speaking about employment for youths in the region, indigenes of the Niger Delta area rank high among the employed by oil corporations in the country. The arguments that the communities are marginalized is not totally correct. The treason is that oil corporations gives out 3% of its annual budget to the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) for developmental projects in the communities. Also, scholarships and educational support among other stipends are handed to these communities under the aegis of corporate and social responsibilities.

Sokari⁴ and Atie⁵, indigenes of Bayelsa and Delta States, whose relatives benefited from the amnesty programme opined that:

The objectives of the amnesty programme was to disarm, demobilise, and re-integrate ex-militants. While these has been achieved, the core challenges affecting the region as not been addressed. This is responsible for the return of some youths to the creeks who engage in nefarious activities. Issues associated with resource control and environmental degradation results from political and constitutional imbalances. The explains why the amnesty programme cannot address environmental degradation and resource control in the region.

Chukwu⁶, a personnel of a Nigerian oil corporation in the Niger Delta region noted that the main cause of militancy is poverty and insincerity. He furthered that community leaders in the area are fond of embezzling funds set aside for community development. This is responsible for the lack of basic social amenities. Also some of the youths are lazy and as such depends on the government for benefits rather than acquiring requisite. He argued about the impact of the amnesty as follows:

The programme also brought about training and employment for many youths in the region. Many of them were offered jobs in various departments of the oil sector. Further, it played a major role at disarming the youths engaged in destruction of oil facilities and the kidnap of oil workers. The problem of oil spillage and resource control has not been fully addressed. The government, especially as officials in-charge are diverting funds meant for community development. Also, the Ijaw and Itsekiri people are still in disagreement over land ownership and fighting to gain control of the resources in their areas.

Similarly, Usman⁷ and Ekpo⁸ argued that many questions which includes determining the sincerity of the militia groups at embracing amnesty in exchange for their arms as well as ascertaining and proffering solutions to the causes of hostilities in theregion remains hanging aftermath of the adoption of the amnesty programme. They argued therefore that the amnesty programme failed to attend to the demands of the region having focused on the effects rather than the causes of the challenges in the region.

Towobola⁹ and Ben¹⁰ claimed that while the amnesty programme thrived in the aspect of disarming some militia groups and provided some degree of social benefits for people of the region in form of employment and scholarship opportunities, the policy failed to address the core challenges of resource control and environmental degradation in the region.

Literature exists that supports the above positions. For instance, Rhuks and Ohiocheoya (2013:3)avers that despite the adoption of the amnesty programme, it failed to address violence in the region birthed by the clamour for resource control and the challenge of environmental degradation. Further, Ajodo-Adebanjoko (2017:13), submits that despite the seeming success of the amnesty programme, it is riddled with cases of corruption. The attendant ramifications are notable in the emergence of new militia groups in the region like the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), the Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (JNDLF), the Niger Delta Red Squad (NDRS), the AdakaBoro Avengers (ABA) and the Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM).

The above position was corroborated by Maryjane¹¹, an indigene of Ukwani, Delta State. She noted that the amnesty programme rather than ameliorate the challenges in the region, made it more complex. The reason is adduced to the position that the programme targeted only a cross section of the populace. Persons who felt neglected has since returned to the creeks to continue their agitations. With

recourse to the amnesty programme giving rise to the emergence of new militia groups, Harrison¹² and Omonu¹³ remarked that rather than address the challenges associated with the region, the amnesty programme midwived new militant groups who felt marginalised and relegated during the course of implementing the programme. Hence, the policy served as a short time solution to the challenges in the region.

In the same vein, Atikpe¹⁴ and Agunyai¹⁵ noted that the amnesty programme is an initiative adopted by the government to distract the militants from the creeks. Hence, it has not proffered lasting solutions to the challenges of the region. Most of the pipelines are old and rusty therefore susceptible to breakage. Appeals by indigenes of the communities to have the government address these challenges fall on deaf ears. This is due to the high level of corrupt practices within the Niger Delta Development Commission as well as the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs. It is only in a matter of time before the militia groups will rise again in the region.

In corollary, the Coordinator, National Affairs of the United Ex-Freedom Fighters Forum, Mutu Dumex argued that:

We call for a complete overhaul of the amnesty programme with a view to repositioning it so as to achieve its set objectives. Successive representatives of from the Niger Delta region have derailed from the core aims of the initiative. It is noteworthy that the stipends, school fees and medical bills of beneficiaries of the initiatives are not being paid as and when due. (Premium Times, 2019: 1).

From the foregoing, it may be deduced that the amnesty initiative adopted by the Government has acted in all its capacities as a temporal solution to the concerns of the Niger Delta people. The reasons are adduced to the minimal success the initiative has achieved at addressing the spate of militancy and socio-economic challenges of the region. Also, the study revealed that the amnesty programme targeted some militia groups at the expense of the others. This is responsible for the re-birth of militia groups in the region. Further, representatives of the Niger Delta People under the aegis of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as well as the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs rather than pursue the interest and wellbeing of the people, divert public funds into their personal coffers. The implication is witnessed in the socio-economic degeneracy being witnessed in the region. Hence, while issues associated with resource control, environmental degradation and social amenities are far from being addressed, hostility and its attendant ramifications are very much in the offing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the amnesty programme rather than address the challenges of militia groups in the Niger Delta has birthed new militia groups capable of causing mayhem in the region. This was triggered by the high level of indifference displayed by the Government and the representatives of the region with recourse to the yearnings of the people in the region.

The study recommends the overhaul of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), and the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the adoption of a people-centred representation. This is adduced to the high level of misappropriation of funds and under-representation that characterizes both agencies. Also, provisions of the National Conference as well as that of the All Progressives Congress (APC) on resource control which allows states' some degree of control of their resources should be adopted. This will make the representatives of the region to be accountable to the people in terms of revenue generation and allocation. Further, the federal government of the country should take proactive measures at 'cleaning up' the Ogoni land which has long suffered from oil-spillage. Similarly, Oil corporations should adopt

innovative and technological-driven mechanisms of extracting resources in the region, so as to reduce environmental degradation.

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