



# **Rivers of blood:** Gang Violence In Nigeria's Garden State

JUNE 2020

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## **BACKGROUND**

**Since the end of military rule in Nigeria in 1999, gang activities and the corresponding violence have seen a gradual but steady increase in Rivers state, in Nigeria's Niger Delta. From the formation of the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) in the early 1980s at the University of Port Harcourt, various criminal gangs known as cults have sprung up in different parts of the state, with varying membership strengths, and holding different stretches of territory within the state.**

Prominent amongst the more than 100 cult groups known to operate in the state are the Deewell, Deebam, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Gberesaako Boys, and the Outlaws. These cult groups individually and collectively have constituted a menace to the inhabitants of the state, causing incalculable human and economic loss in the process. In the first decade

of the century, some of these cult groups began to morph into militancy, blurring the line between groups that had always been militants and those who leveraged the organization the cult groups gave to engage in militancy. They ended up waging war against the oil industry for years, reducing Nigeria's oil production output. To keep the oil flowing, the government eventually created an amnesty programme for repentant militants which still runs till this very day. Since the reason for the formation of these cult groups and the socio-economic and socio-political issues which ensure their growth remains prominent within the society, these violent groups continue to exist and pose a serious threat to lives and property and the general development of Rivers State. As is usual with such groups that control territory, they have become integral in the politics of the state, and this has made some of the groups very powerful. It is this melting pot of socio-economics, politics, history, intertribal conflict and violent agitation for resource control that brings a unique bent to the cult issue in Rivers State.

## HISTORY

**The history of cult groups in Rivers state can be traced to the formation of the Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) also known as the Adventurers or the De Norsemen Club of Nigeria at the University of Port Harcourt in 1984, by a former member of the Buccaneers Confraternity<sup>1</sup>.**

In 1991, Onengiye Ofori Terika, a member of the Klansmen Konfraternity, popularly known as Occasion Boy, formed the Deebam cult group in his community Bukuma, in Degema Local Government Area of Rivers state. The group was meant to serve as the street wing of the Klansmen Konfraternity formed in the University of Calabar in 1983, and also to fight for compensation owed by Shell and other oil companies to the Bukuma community<sup>2</sup>.

In the early 1990s, to reduce the

influence of the KK in Rivers state, and to maintain territorial control, the SVC elected to form its own street wing which it termed the Junior Vikings Confraternity (JVC) as a counter to the Occasion Boy led the Deebam group. The JVC venture was unsuccessful but it eventually laid the foundation for the formation of the Deewell group in the Diobu axis of Port Harcourt.

In the early 2000s, with the Deewell group losing territory and members and still unable to match the ruthlessness and seeming effectiveness of the Deebam group despite allegedly having support from the state government<sup>4</sup>. A group of five SVC members, which was termed the '5 Wise Men'<sup>5</sup> came together. This group of five<sup>6</sup> included Ateke Tom and Julius Oruitemeka, who were then trained on the practices of the new group which was named Icelanders, and which was handed over to Ateke Tom—leader of the street cult group known as The Ugliers—to manage<sup>7</sup>.

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1. Contemporary Nigerian Cultist Groups: Demystifying the 'Invisibilities', IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, N57, March 2019, p 9

2. Jennifer M. Hazen, Jonas Honer; Small Arms, Armed Violence, and Insecurity in Nigeria: The Niger Delta in Perspective,

3. Ibid p 117

4. Patrick Naagbanton; More Tales From Our Columbia, 2007, <https://bit.ly/37uRDoo>

5. Jennifer M. Hazen and Jonas Honer, p 119

6. Ibid

7. Patrick Naagbanton

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“The 2015 elections in Rivers were also a bloody affair. Despite the overt display of violence which caused elections not to be held in Abonnema for example, results were declared for the community. The situation was hardly different four years later during the 2019 presidential elections when a man...”

The Icelanders cult group setup its base in Okochiri in Okrika Local Government of Rivers state, the home of Ateke Tom. Over time, and in a bid to rebrand and fend off the negative perception its violent activities had brought, the group was rechristened the Niger Delta Vigilante Service (NDVS).

Many other cult groups have been formed at different points in time in the history of Rivers state. The proliferation of these groups have, in many cases, been at the behest of politicians seeking power and consequently funding and arming these cult groups to unleash violence on opponents and to ensure seamless

rigging into office. It is for this reason that elections in Rivers state have continued to see violence which has been reported by the SBM on different occasions. An example of this is the Gberesaako Boys which is a cult group confined to the Ogoni axis of Rivers state, and which was formed by the Gokana Council Chairman in 2001 using funds from the Local Government’s Security Vote. The group which was armed with various weapons including automatic weapons were then used during the 2003 and 2007 elections in the area<sup>9</sup>.

The 2015 elections in Rivers<sup>10</sup> were also a bloody affair. Despite the overt display of violence which caused

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8. Patrick Naagbantoni; More Tales From Our Columbia, 2007.

9. Reuters: Pre-election violence kills 9 in southern Nigeria; <https://reut.rs/2Ywf6la>

10. Cheta Nwanze: Politics as war – the Rivers State model; <https://bit.ly/3f1eZWn>

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elections not to be held in Abonnema for example, results were declared for the community. The situation was hardly different four years later during the 2019 presidential elections when a man, Thywill Dabotubo was shot by gunmen dressed in military uniform while waiting to cast his vote. In the same place, a staff member of INEC, Ibisaki Amachree was killed by a stray bullet. Rivers state witnessed<sup>11</sup> some of the most violent incidents relating to the election. Despite the army uniforms involved in Abonnema, many people interviewed at the time believed that the perpetrators were actually gang members.

Since socio-political and socio-economic issues play an important part in the formation of armed groups, a good number of the armed groups formed in Rivers state have community backing and serve as vigilantes and community armies used to wage communal warfare revolving around land ownership, and chieftaincy disagreements. The

Bush Boys of Okrika was formed for this particular purpose, so cannot be referred to as a cult group. The Bush Boys were formed by the Chiefs and community members of Okrika to serve as a vigilante group for Okrika due to a territorial dispute between Okrika and Eleme revolving around the land housing the Port Harcourt Refinery. The settlement of this issue and the financial benefits to be derived, saw the Bush Boys engaging in battles with the Eleme community.

The Bush Boys group would later be routed from Okrika before the 2003 general elections by the Rivers PDP backed Iceland group led by Ateke Tom. This was done to ensure the state governor at the time, Peter Odili, gained control of Okrika which had been an ANPP stronghold prior to that time<sup>12</sup>. A noted leader of Bush Boys, Sunday Opuambe was gunned down<sup>13</sup> in the Abuloma area of Port Harcourt by suspected members of the Greenlanders group in February 2009.

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11. Nigeria: Widespread Violence Ushers in President's New Term; <https://bit.ly/3hxxCCa>

12. Pointblank News: Fresh Wardrums in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/3hwBONW>

13. 2 gang leaders killed: Bush Boys – Greenlanders resume hostilities; <https://bit.ly/2MZ9jPB>

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## PROMINENT GROUPS

**A look at the prominent cult groups in Rivers state shows that their origins can be traced to the formation of the Supreme Viking Confraternity in 1984 and the formation of the Deebam group in 1991.**

These groups as has been mentioned earlier are the Deewell and Icелander group which we have seen were formed by the SVC. The Deebam group as we have also seen was formed by a member of the KK.

The Supreme Vikings Confraternity (SVC) has the University of Port Harcourt as its headquarters and

stronghold which is known as its 'Alpha Marine' with its branch in the Rivers State University referred to as 'Beta Marine'. Its membership consists of undergraduates and university graduates.

The Iceland cult group although having its stronghold and headquarters in Okochiri, has a membership spread across many communities mostly in the Town area of Rivers state and other neighbouring Niger Delta states.

The Deewell group has as its stronghold the old Port Harcourt Township, the Diobu axis, some parts of Emouha and Khana Local Government Areas in the Ogoni axis.



EMUOHA

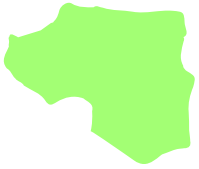


DEGEMA

GANG	AREAS OF OPERATION
Supreme Viking Confraternity	Port Harcourt, Emuoha
Deebam	Degema
Iceland/Niger Delta Vigilante Service	Okochiri, Port Harcourt, Ogba Egbema Ndoni Diobu,
Deewell	Emuoha, Khana
Outlaws	Degema
Greenlanders	Port Harcourt, Emuoha
Black Axe	Port Harcourt
Elegem Face	Port Harcourt

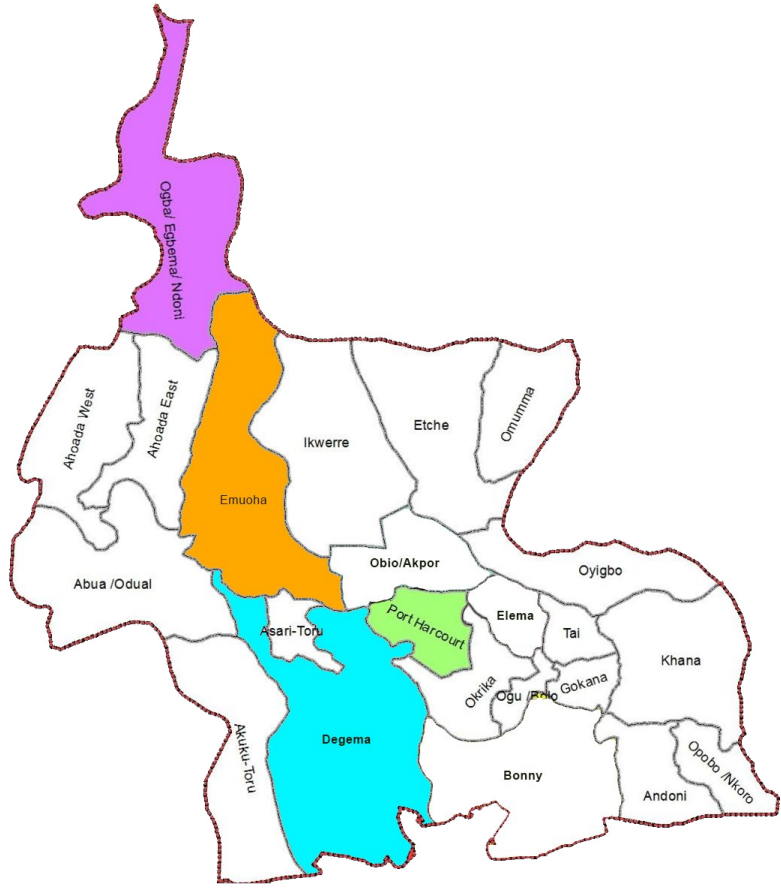


OGBA EGBEMA



PORT HARCOURT

GANG	AREAS OF OPERATION
Malcolm X	Port Harcourt
Thomas Sankara Boys	Port Harcourt
Dragons	Port Harcourt
KGB	Port Harcourt
Vultures	Port Harcourt
Executioners	Port Harcourt
White Angels	Port Harcourt
Mafites	Port Harcourt
Blood Suckers	Port Harcourt
Brotherhood of Blood	Port Harcourt
Predators	Port Harcourt
Panama Pirates	Port Harcourt





The Deebam group which earlier in its life had its headquarters in Bukuma, has had its headquarters moved to the Ogbakiri axis of Emohua Local Government Area after its founder, Onengiyeofori Terika, popularly known as Occasion Boy, was killed in October 2003 in a shootout with members of Deewell and Iceland in an attempt to take over Tombia a neighbouring community<sup>14</sup>. Deebam has as its stronghold in Emohua Local Government area, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Port Harcourt, and the Ogoni axis of Rivers state. It has been noted

that Deebam and its rival Deewell have presence in all 170 communities in Ogoni<sup>15</sup>.

Soboma George was a right hand man to Ateke Tom that became disgruntled after he was handed over by Ateke Tom to the police for murder. After being broken out of jail, George teamed up with some of his former Iceland colleagues to form The Outlaws, a gang that went on to have the Icelander group as its arch enemy. Soboma George was killed in 2010 while attending a football game he

**“A 2019 research which observed 18 of the 23 local government areas in Rivers state showed that the local governments most affected by cult related activities between 2009 and 2018 were Emouha, Andoni, Ahoada East, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ikwerre, and Port Harcourt City local government areas...”**

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14. The Jamestown Foundation: Origins of the Niger Delta's Deewell and Deebams Militias; <https://bit.ly/3eg8fCQ>

15. National Working Group on Armed Violence (NWGAV) and Action on Armed Violence (AOAV); The Violent Road: An Overview of Armed Violence in Nigeria

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organised<sup>16</sup>. The Outlaws, prior to the killing of its leader, had its stronghold in the Kalabari axis of Rivers state<sup>17</sup>.

The Greenland gang was formed in the run up to the 2003 General Elections in Rivers state by a former founding member of the Iceland group known as Julius Oruitemeka. Oruitemeka was allegedly decapitated by Ateke Tom in 2004, and this led to the amalgamation of the Greenlanders into his Iceland/NDVS group<sup>18</sup>.

Apart from the above mentioned cult groups, it has been reported that as at 2004, over 100 cult groups were operating in Rivers state. Some of the cult groups include the Black

Axe, Elegemface, Malcolm X, Thomas Sankara Boys, Dragons, KGB, Vultures, Executioners, White Angels, Mafites, Blood Suckers, Brotherhood of Blood, Predators, and Panama Pyrates<sup>19</sup>.

These groups have fewer members when compared to the much larger groups highlighted earlier and have limited spread.

A 2019 research which observed 18 of the 23 local government areas in Rivers state showed that the local governments most affected by cult related activities between 2009 and 2018 were Emouha, Andoni, Ahoada East, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ikwerre, and Port Harcourt City local government areas<sup>20</sup>.

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16. Punch: How I organised Soboma George's murder, kidnapped VC in Rivers – Suspect; <https://bit.ly/2ULaRkF>

17. Jstor: <https://bit.ly/2Y1df8Y>

18. The Many tangled Roots of MEND; <https://bit.ly/2Y70KHn>

19. Owonikoko B. Saheed, Ifukor Uche; From Campuses to Communities: Community-Based Cultism and Local Responses in the Niger Delta Region, Nigeria; IJAH, VOL. 5(4), S/N 19, SEPTEMBER, 2016, p 85–86, <https://bit.ly/3e5khir>

20. N. R. Nwaogu1, V. E. Weli and M. D. Mbee; Evaluation of Youth Vulnerability to Community Cultism in Selected States in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, Asian Journal of Advanced Research and Reports 7(4): 1-14, 2019; Article no.AJARR.53779 ISSN: 2582-3248

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## RECENT EVENTS

**In May 2016, about 19 persons were killed and 5 beheaded in a suspected cult clash in Idaho and Ulapata communities in Ahoada East Local government of the state<sup>21</sup>.**

In June 2016, two police officers and five other persons were killed in a cult clash between Icelanders and Greenlanders in Rumuji and Ovogo communities in Emohua local government area<sup>22</sup>.

In June 2017, 14 persons were killed in Sime community in Tai local government area of Rivers state in a cult clash between the Icelanders and the Greenlanders<sup>23</sup>.

In April 2017, 12 persons were killed in a cult clash between Icelanders and members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Andoni local government

area<sup>24</sup>.

In January 2018, 7 persons were killed in a cult clash in Ajakaja community in Andoni local government area<sup>25</sup>.

In February 2018 in Omerelu community in Ikwerre local government area, five people were killed in a clash between rival cult groups, with four of the five beheaded<sup>26</sup>. While in August of same year, a vigilante leader in Rumuolumeni in Obio/Akpor local government area was shot dead by suspected cultists<sup>27</sup>.

In May 2019, at least 10 persons were killed in an attack by members of the Iceland cult group on Kono-Boue in Khana local government area<sup>28</sup>.

In April 2019, 3 persons were killed in Mgbudohia community in Obio/Akpor local government area after disagreements between members of

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21. Nigerian Bulletin: Rivers State : 5 People Beheaded in Cult Clash (GRUESOME PHOTO); <https://bit.ly/37yo5GM>

22. Punch: Two policemen, five others killed in Rivers cult clashes; <https://bit.ly/2MZ9Hh1>

23. Punch: 14 die as rival cults clash in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/3hySpWm>

24. The Tide: Renewed Cult Clashes Claim 12 in Andoni; <https://bit.ly/3frspKo>

25. Nigerian Tribune: 7 Feared Killed In Rivers Community Cult Clash; <https://bit.ly/2Y0IzEG>

26. Vanguard: 4 beheaded, another murdered in Rivers cult clash; <https://bit.ly/2zziseN>

27. Punch: Cultists kill vigilante leader in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/2Y1e1Tq>

28. DailyTrust: 10 killed in Rivers as rival cults clash; <https://bit.ly/30IDeUh>

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Iceland and Deebam on which groups should collect illegal levies from land developers<sup>29</sup>.

In October 2019, 4 persons were killed in Etche local government area and houses set ablaze in a cult clash between members of Deewell and Deebam<sup>30</sup>.

In February 2020, 8 persons were killed in Okporoko community in Emohua local government area in a clash between new generation members and older members of a

cult group in a battle for control<sup>31</sup>.

In May 2020, members of Deewell beat to death a member of Deebam who was caught after snatching the phone of a pregnant woman in the Diobu axis of the state<sup>32</sup>.

In March 2020, 2 persons were killed in a cult clash between rival groups in Bera community of Gokana local government area<sup>33</sup>. Also in May 2020, a vegetable seller and two others were killed in a clash between members of Iceland and Deebam in

**“In March 2020, 2 persons were killed in a cult clash between rival groups in Bera community of Gokana local government area. Also in May 2020, a vegetable seller and two others were killed in a clash between members of Iceland and Deebam in the Mile 3 axis of the state over the collection of levies from traders in the area...”**

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29. PremiumTimes: Three killed in Rivers cult clash; <https://bit.ly/2Y0tzXw>

30. The Guardian: Four feared killed as cult gangs clash in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/2YB2DN8>

31. Vanguard: Eight killed as cultists clash in Rivers community; <https://bit.ly/37DXgRu>

32. The Nation: One feared dead as cultists clash in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/3fvpNuX>

33. The Sun: Cult clash claims 2 in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/37D1sAP>

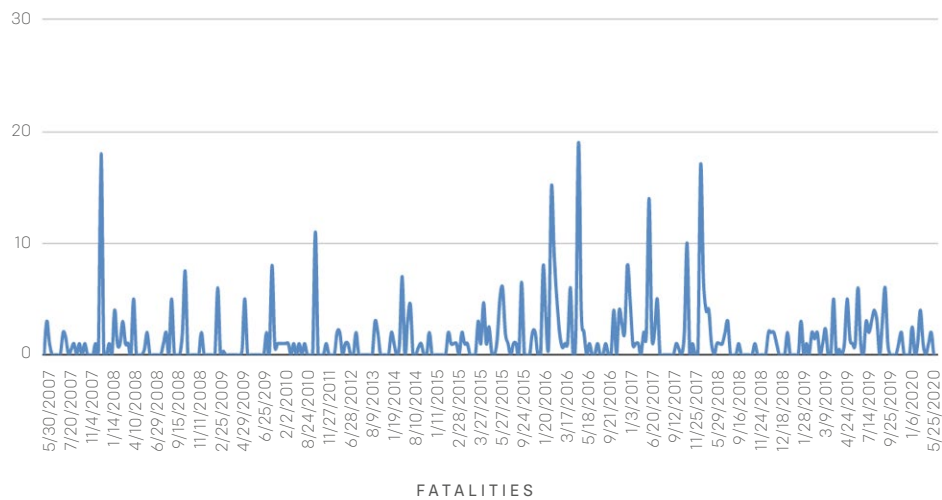
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the Mile 3 axis of the state over the collection of levies from traders in the area<sup>34</sup>.

One of the worst massacres by armed groups in Rivers state occurred in Omoku in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local

government area of the state on 1st January 2018 when armed men led by militant leader Don Wanny shot and killed at least 22 persons who were returning from the cross-over night vigil service<sup>35</sup>.

### Fatalities in attacks between 2007-2020



34. The Port City News: Vegetable seller, two others killed during cult clash in Port Harcourt; <https://bit.ly/30KNT0w>

35. Punch: Rivers' New Year bloodbath; <https://bit.ly/2zxUb8M>

## GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

**In 2016, the Rivers state governor, Nyesom Wike offered an amnesty to repentant gang members in the state willing to surrender their weapons and embrace peace. The move saw the acceptance of the amnesty by cult members, including Don Wanny who would go on to commit one of the most gruesome massacres in Rivers state on New Year's Day of 2018. Reacting to the New Year's Day attack, Governor Wike placed a ₦640 million bounty on 32 suspected cultists in the state<sup>36</sup>.**

In March 2018, the Rivers state House of Assembly passed three anti crime bills; the Neighbourhood

Watch Safety Corps No.6 of 2018 , the State Anti-cultism Bill and the Rivers State anti-Kidnap (Prohibition) (Amendment) No.2 Law No.7 of 2018<sup>37</sup>.

In June 2019, the Rivers State Government made known its plans to stop offering amnesty to cultists considering that many of those who were granted amnesty returned to their criminal activities<sup>38</sup>.

Meanwhile, the response of the state government to the activities of the different criminal gangs operating in the state has been deemed inadequate. Amnesty International in its 2020 report<sup>39</sup> on the rising cult related killings in Rivers state opined that "Our findings show that the government is still not doing enough to protect people in these communities from attacks. The killers are literally getting away with murder, while no one is being arrested or punished for these crimes."

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36. Punch: [Full List] 32 alleged cultists declared wanted by Rivers govt; <https://bit.ly/2N1Ova8>

37. DailyTrust: Wike signs 3 anti-crime bills into law; <https://bit.ly/2N29fi2>

38. Today: Governor Wike: I will no longer grant amnesty to cultists; <https://bit.ly/3e5qdYL>

39. Amnesty: Nigeria: Rise in Cult Related killings in Rivers state; <https://bit.ly/3e5rgYS>

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## ECONOMIC IMPACT

The effects of these gangs on Rivers state has been nothing short of debilitating. There is a substantial body of literature that has examined the close interplay between gang violence and the adverse economic effects they leave in their wake.

Gangs have been shown to be an important component of understanding society because “understanding these social actors is crucial to fashioning public policies and building social movements that can both reduce violence and erode the deep-seated inequalities that all too often are reinforced by present economic, social, and military policies.<sup>40</sup>” Around the world, globalisation, with its effect including the dwindling of the authority of the nation-state in favour of international financial flows and neo-liberal monetary policy; the rise of utilising punitive state force to solve issues of marginalisation, the absence or erosion of social welfare and the rise of cultural identities which has

“In Rivers, the dominant economic activity from a value perspective is the extraction of hydrocarbon resources. The state boasts perhaps the most extensive oil...”

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fuelled the rise of nationalism within the borders of most sovereign states, manifests in gang activity.

In Rivers, the dominant economic activity from a value perspective is the extraction of hydrocarbon resources. The state boasts perhaps the most extensive oil industry footprint, including pipelines, ports, tank farms, administrative and mobility infrastructure as well as a refinery that supports an equally substantial offshore industry. The oil industry, by nature, a high-skill but low labour intensive enterprise,

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40. Hagedorn, John M. The Global Impact of Gangs in Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice 21(2):153. May 2005.

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does not employ a large number of people anywhere in the best of times. According to a 2005 working paper by the International Labour Organization, the oil industry creates over 65,000 direct jobs in Nigeria, and more than 250,000 jobs in non-direct employment<sup>41</sup>. In the United States, that number is 9.8 million or 5.6 percent of total U.S. employment<sup>42</sup>.

For Rivers, like many other oil producing states, this has led to a dual situation where many interest groups and residents complain of being marginalised and demand more from the oil companies while most economic activity – especially agriculture and trading – is inefficiently geared towards serving the oil industry, deepening existing structural inequalities. Given that the biggest money spinner for these groups is crude oil theft, their activities, which include the breaking of pipelines and well heads to siphon crude oil or refined petroleum products, have led to the pollution of the Niger Delta environment. Although the majority of the pollution in the Niger Delta is as a result of

poorly maintained oil facilities, these cult groups, since the rise of militancy in the region, have contributed a lot to the pollution. Gang violence only serves to exacerbate the deprivation of residents by destroying or adversely impacting already poor public infrastructure and services.

The gangs have also branched out into other areas ranging from petty theft to car snatching, drug dealing, bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom, murder for hire and of course, political thuggery.

A market survey carried out by SBM Intelligence in Port Harcourt the Rivers state capital in 2019 showed that the activities of these criminal gangs has not just led to the movement of businesses outside the state leading to a rise in unemployment, but has also affected the property business in the state. Violent cult clashes in local communities have seen various degrees of internal displacement of people within the state and the desertion of communities known to be hotspots for these clashes<sup>43</sup>.

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41. Fajana, Sola. Industrial Relations in the Oil Industry in Nigeria, Working paper 237. International Labour Organization.

42. American Petroleum Institute. How Many Jobs Has The Oil And Natural Gas Industry Created? <https://bit.ly/2zzjyXX>

43. Vanguard: Peace returns to Ogbakiri after years of communal clash; <https://bit.ly/37uXuKu>

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The Niger Delta militancy which was at its most intense from 2004 till 2009, led to the reduction of Nigeria's oil production capabilities, its foreign exchange earnings, and negatively affected the economy of the country, forcing the government to implement an amnesty programme to reduce the attacks on oil production facilities.

Gang activity and violence further depress business activity where the gangs reside and their suitability on both potential investors and customers that patronize these businesses. Small businesses lose customers, which results in the loss of revenue, loss of funds due to theft, income impairment and business restoration costs. If a gang decides to claim a territory as its own, this often either puts fear into current and potential customers and prevents them from patronising the business or it distorts economic activity in these areas when gangs (often) demand charges and levies for operating in their territory. This is already prevalent in many communities in the riverine parts of Rivers.

In addition to all the other negative effects of youth joining gangs, young people who become gang members are often an economic burden to society. For example in the United States where extensive study has been done, the cost of incarcerating gang members actually exceeds annual expenses at top private universities, which can total about \$60,000 per student for tuition, room, and board<sup>44</sup>. In this sense, gangs become very significant economic actors, exercising an outsize influence on the allocations of security, judicial, administrative and policing resources to the detriment of other public goods. The hegemonic control exercised by El Salvadorian gangs over vast swathes of the country has led to the world's highest crime rate and the seventh poorest economy in Latin America, only ahead of Belize, Bolivia, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Haiti, all of which are also home of world renowned gangs<sup>45</sup>.

In Rivers, as in much of the Niger Delta, this economic integration has led to the rise of the political influence

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44. Prevention Works. Impact of Gang Violence on Businesses and Communities; <https://bit.ly/2Y2HOWJ>

45. Global Risk Insights. The economic impact of gang violence in El Salvador; <https://bit.ly/2YALH9A>

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**“It is important to note that the inability of the government and security agencies to curb the activities of cult groups in Rivers State has forced communities...”**

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of prominent gang leaders. This political dimension has seen local elections in Rivers State becoming more violent as politicians employ members of gangs to intimidate voters and political opponents. The relationship between the politicians and various cult groups and their members have consequently emboldened cult members to seek elective offices. In the 2015 general elections, King Ateke Tom—Ateke Tom was crowned King of Okochiri in 2017<sup>46</sup>—made his intention known to contest the governorship elections in Rivers state<sup>47</sup>. In 2008, Human Rights Watch reported that members

of the SVC had won elections in the state House of Assembly leading to Port Harcourt residents referring to the House of Assembly as ‘Viking House’<sup>48</sup>.

This is perhaps evidence that gang leaders are in the process of transferring the hard evasive, survival, community organising and negotiating skills they learned in their previous lives to their new found roles as political operators, so called ‘kingpins’ who have been able to convert their influence over well armed, well organised gangs into significant political heft.

It is important to note that the inability of the government and security agencies to curb the activities of cult groups in Rivers State has forced communities to set up and arm various vigilante outfits, leading to the further proliferation of arms in the state. An example of one of such groups which is presently active is the ONELGA Security Planning and Advisory Committee known as OSPAC<sup>49</sup> which was set up in 2016 by Maxwell Ahiaikwo, an academic

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46. DailyPost: Ateke Tom, ex-militant leader crowned King of Okochiri in Rivers; <https://bit.ly/3hwUG4j>

47. DailyPost: Ex- Niger Delta militant set to contest 2015 governorship election in Rivers state; <https://bit.ly/3fp44oE>

48. Human Rights Watch: Annex: Partial Overview of Cults, Gangs, and “Militant Groups” in Rivers State; <https://bit.ly/3fpmaGV>

49. BBC News Pidgin: Omoku: Di Nigerian community wey ‘cultists’ don scatter; <https://bbc.in/2C9HodM>

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**“One of the unintended consequences of the amnesty programme has been the elevation and normalisation of gangs as legitimate economic participants – through the award of contracts and tenders for such activities as ironically, the provision of security services...”**

based in Omoku. The vigilante outfit was set up as a response to the growing insecurity in Ogba Egbema Ndoni local government, which was terrorised by a noted criminal gang member, Johnson Igwedibia, better known as Don Waney. Waney -- also a leader of the local Iceland group -- who was responsible for the murder of 23 worshippers on New Year's Day in 2018, was killed by security forces a week later. The set up of these vigilante groups has raised serious human rights concerns as reports of extrajudicial killings make the news<sup>50</sup> as these vigilante groups adopt the very tactics that the gangs make use

of, in order to defeat the gangs.

One of the unintended consequences of the amnesty programme has been the elevation and normalisation of gangs as legitimate economic participants – through the award of contracts and tenders for such activities as ironically, the provision of security services. It is perhaps emblematic of the far reaching power of cults and gangs in Rivers that they have evolved from fringe groups occupied by petty squabbles and economic sabotage to politically connected militias mid-size who cannot be ignored.

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50. Nigeria: Tension in Rivers Communities As Suspected Vigilantes Kill Scores in Night Raid; <https://bit.ly/2U02bdn>

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## CONCLUSION

**As has been seen in many places all over the world including Honduras, Mexico and Columbia, gang culture has roots in socio-economic problems.**

The Rivers gang problem is no different. The lack of opportunity caused by the devastation of communities due to oil exploration and the Nigerian situation, coupled with the visible inequality made the development of fringe slums like the aptly named Columbia community in Port Harcourt in the 1980s. Communities like these operate on the fringe of society as ungoverned spaces and they are the breeding grounds for gang activity. Once these mix with the organisational capabilities provided by student cult groups, they provide the much needed structure that Rivers gangs have shown. A similar meta situation is what is seen in the favelas of Brazil where the educated leftists locked up with gang leaders brought the structure that has empowered these gangs. However, there are two other crucial ingredients which makes

the problem become all permeating and near intractable. First, the involvement of political patronage in gangs. This provides funding, as well as cover for impunity and some degrees of legitimacy for the gang leaders. We have seen this in Rivers state repeatedly as this report has shown. A second is a means of income for these gangs that is independent of the government – in Rivers, this is provided through oil bunkering and kidnapping.

A final point to note is that many of these gangs start off with community support. While ultimately, as they

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evolve, the willing support morphs into a fearful exhibition of support, this community base is integral to the operation of these gangs. Government must realize that the solution is not a token locking up or killing of gang leaders. This changes nothing and only brings about violence as fighting always ensues to take over the lucrative structures these gangs have once a leader is gone. What is more important getting to the root cause

of the problem – the socio-economic issues, the legitimacy issues that make communities turn to gangs in the first place, the justice issues and the myopia of political operatives who prefer to take the shortcut of gang violence to win elections. Without tackling these, the head of the hydra will always regrow, irrespective of how many times or how many heads are cut.



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