

AS President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua enters the second years of his four-year tenure, it is appropriate to ask the simple question: What exactly do Nigerian militants want? Specifically, what do the armed militants in the Niger Delta want? And what does the unarmed Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) want? I am here limiting myself to these two groups - leaving, for now, other socio-political and socio-cultural organisations asking for one form of national geopolitical reform or another.

We need to pay more attention to what "underground" and banned political groups say because the more serious of them - serious in terms of impact, positive or negative - have only minimal means of communicating with the larger public, and when they communicate, they are usually economical with words. We may list five costly mistakes, among others, that are often made in the state's approach to rebels and rebel movements. One is to assume that these "outlaws" represent only themselves, or their "secret sponsors", or at most a minority of those they claim to represent. The "silent majority" are said to be "law-abiding" and do not approve of the rebels' mission or their methods.

Another mistake is to assume that the rebels' demands are known (by the rulers) but will be better met without the rebels. The idea then leads to practical attempts to appropriate the rebels' demands and "sanitise" them, thereby making them fit for incorporation into the rulers' agenda. The third mistake is to try to bribe some rebel leaders to betray and scandalise their group or other specific leaders. Failing that, the rulers select amenable people from the rebel movement, proclaim them new or alternative "leaders" of the movement, and start negotiating with them - all in an attempt to alienate the authentic rebel leaders from their claimed constituents.

The fourth mistake is to adopt and use, military coercion. The fifth is to impose strict censorship on information

What do the militants want?

By Edwin Madunagu

about rebel groups and their activities. The last policy is however becoming less and less effective with the advance in communication technology. In general, history including the history of Nigeria, argues against these responses to militants and militant groups.

I recall that an Urhobo friend of mine once said that a man "who boasts to neighbours and visitors that he is boiling yam when in fact, he is boiling stone, is ultimately deceiving himself". I also recall what a political historian once said about revolutions: "The superstition that used to ascribe revolutions to the ugly intentions of agitators is a thing of the past. Today everyone knows that whenever a revolutionary upheaval takes place, its source lies in some social need that outdated institutions are not meeting. The need may not be felt strongly enough or widely enough to obtain immediate success, but any attempt at brutal repression will only make it more powerful..."

Let us begin with the Niger Delta. *The Guardian* of Monday, May 19, 2008, carries on page 5, the story: *Militants threaten to continue armed struggle in the Niger Delta*. The story was based on a communique issued, through the internet, by the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC). The organisation is a group "comprising the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, The Reformed Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and the Martyrs' Brigade". The communique was signed on behalf of JRC by its spokesperson, Cynthia Whyte; and its immediate aim was to refute reports that militants in the Niger Delta were in dialogue with the government, and to affirm the continuation of the "armed struggle". The communique was characteristically sophisticated and polemical.

I read through *The Guardian's* report a couple of times to find an answer to the question, "What do they really want?" My search yielded fruit midway into the report: "We do not need your appointments", said the JRC. "We demand just recompense". Now, what is "just recompense?" This ques-

tion has been answered explicitly and implicitly in various ways and several times in the past, by the umbrella organisation and its constituent members. Each answer reduces to "resource control" and "political self-determination". These are elastic principles that can be given concrete contents only in a dialogue.

The only explicit demand of the JRC in that statement is political and maximum. It is in the last paragraph of the report: "We demand, therefore, a Sovereign National Conference where the various nationalities that were forcefully conscripted into the Nigerian state would be allowed to give their position on whether they would like to continue in this enterprise called Nigeria". This is a maximum demand. Only a dialogue with authentic representatives can discover minimum and intermediate demands. Generally, a rebel movement does not go into a negotiation with minimum demands or compromises. It is only honest and serious negotiations can produce compromises.

So we have "resource control", "self-determination" and "Sovereign National Conference". The demands can be formulated and reformulated in various ways. Now, one can argue that there is nothing new or unique in these demands - either in the Niger Delta or in the country as a whole. My response is that there is a difference between JRC's demands and similar demands made by other militants and "non-militant" protesters. And this difference can be found in JRC's method (armed struggle) and its ideological perspective. The perspective can be distilled from the body of the communique under review.

The following ideological positions are taken from the communique: "We are not impressed with the caricature award of the position of a figure - head vice-

president of the Nigerian state to an Ijaw man"; "We are not impressed with the establishment of a lame-duck pseudo-interventionist Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)"; "We wish to state in all fullness that while we will work towards the continuity of strategic and progressive armed struggle in the Niger Delta, we must also assure all men of goodwill that the hoodlums and bandit elements who today threaten to profane and douse the integrity of the true struggle for the emancipation of the people of the Niger Delta will be cornered and dealt with".

Then the dialectics: "However, let us not only forget that these people ("criminals and bandit elements") exist today because those who have lorded over the Nigerian state have consciously refused to give unto Caesar that which truly belongs to Caesar. While we condemn the Nigerian state, we must not fail to condemn some Ijaw and Nigeria Delta elite who will do everything to keep their jobs while they snitch on their people". The militants' position is clear enough. You may not agree with them. But what is called for is a serious and honest negotiation.

The lead front-page story in *The Guardian* of Sunday, May 18, 2008 was titled: "MASSOB hoists flags". It was a report of the preparation by the "Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra" or MASSOB, for its planned protests against, as the movement alleged, the torture and killing of its members by security agents". The Regional Administrator of the Movement, Chief Ikechukwu Ekwe, had earlier told journalists at Enugu that "over 2000 registered members of MASSOB were killed by agents between May 22, 2000 and April 22, this year". As part of the planned protests, men wearing black dresses went around the city of Enugu placing Biafran flags on billboards.

Almost immediately, security

agents started removing the flags. Later came the announcement that security agents were being deployed in the Southeastern states to guard against the degeneration of the planned protests into violence. It is instructive that the Southeastern zone of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), in a statement in Abakiliki, "urged the police to exercise caution in their response to the action". Noting that the protest was essentially non-violent, the PDP then voiced its real concern: "Our attention has been drawn to the orchestrated acts of citizens' harassment, brutality and intimidation and wish to warn against the grave danger of allowing a climate of violence to endanger the policies and programmes of Yar'Adua, who is settling down to provide purposeful leadership to our country".

Now, what does MASSOB really want? Ekwe said in the statement that the Igbo people, *Ndigbo*, have been subjected to "state-sponsored" violence and killings of genocidal proportions since 1953. He claimed that the genocide reached its peak during the Nigeria-Biafra War of (1967-1970). He declared: "As lives and property of *Ndigbo* could not be guaranteed in Nigeria MASSOB was floated in 1999 to continue in a non-violent manner, the pursuit of a separate independent state for the people of eastern Nigeria". He also claimed that "presently, more than one thousand MASSOB members are languishing in various prisons in Nigeria".

Three points can be distilled from this report. *First*, a minimum demand: that the Nigerian state should stop harassing, detaining, beating and killing *Ndigbo* in general and MASSOB members in particular; *second*, a maximum demand: that MASSOB is committed to the creation of a separate sovereign state; and, *third*, an undertaking: that its methods are non-violent. Here, as in the case of the Niger Delta, MASSOB was issuing both a minimum demand and a maximum demand. Only through dialogue, not harassment or violent repression, will the maximum demand be reduced to another minimum demand. Remember the statement of the political historian cited earlier.