

Influence of Coronavirus Pandemic on Security Threats in Niger Delta Region, Nigeria.

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Abstract

Coronavirus pandemic is among the contemporary threats facing humanity. The devastations from its impact on means of livelihood of the people across the world have amounted to a disaster. This informed the seriousness given to its fight, which by far outweighs that given to fight other existing threats such as natural disasters, climate change and terrorism. This diversion of efforts towards the fight against coronavirus pandemic may have slowed down measures to contain prevailing security threats, with the implication of leading to their escalation or causing emergence of new ones. Whether or not there has been an increase or decrease in security threats/risks following the pandemic is a course for concern and a gap in knowledge. This study intends to breach this gap. Utilizing data from ACLED, this research examines the security threats/risks experienced in Niger Delta region of Nigeria amidst the outbreak of coronavirus. Descriptive statistics and GIS were used in analyzing the data. The research compared security threats before and during the pandemic, and found that the prevailing threats were violence against civilians (ie, rape, abduction and sea piracy), agitations (ie, protests and riots), battles (ie, clash by armed gangs /government forces) and bomb explosions. The study further found that violence against civilians and agitations by residents were high during the pandemic than before as a result of restriction of movements imposed by government and inadequate provision of succor and palliatives to residents. The high agitations such as protests and riots are assessed to increase community transmission of the coronavirus in the region. It was concluded that the area remains at high risk of community transmission of the virus due to agitations and of the security threats due to the huge impact of the pandemic on the people. It is recommended that government makes adequate provision and proper distribution/allocation of palliatives to cushion its effect, stimulate the economy and shorten the length of recovery from the disaster.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic, Security Threats, and Niger Delta.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria, reputed to be one of the most richly endowed delta's in the world, contributes hugely to Nigeria's national wealth. Years of political and economic marginalization, environmental degradation, bad governance and policy inconsistency by the government, and the divide and rule policy of the oil companies led to emergence of militancy in the region in the early 2006 [1]. The various activities of militants created a state of general insecurity in the region following various agitations from different groups who felt marginalized. This has led to the indigent people demanding compensation as well as control of the oil wealth. This demand has led to a confrontation between activists and Multinational Oil Companies operating in the region as well as the Federal Government. The struggle which started as a peaceful protest metamorphosed into armed conflict after the killing of a renowned activist and playwright in the region, Ken Sara-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni men. The new wave of protests after this has included the abduction/kidnapping of foreign oil workers, bombing of oil installations, agitations, protests and destruction of lives

and property among others [2] and all these have constituted the major security challenges confronting the region. These security challenges have engendered mass killing of civilians, destruction of properties, disruption of cultural and socio-economic activities of residents, predisposing them to huge psychological and mental trauma. [3] Identified the features of security challenges in Niger Delta to include, kidnapping, armed robbery, sea piracy, pipeline vandalism, burning of houses, beheading of people, prostitution, and threat to life among others. This was also corroborated by Partnership Initiative in the Niger Delta [4]. The escalation of insecurity in Niger Delta region has impacted on socio-economic activities, people's businesses thereby increasing their suffering greatly [5]. The cult conflicts precipitated insecurity as well as unsafe by residents [6]. Many development projects were abandoned as contractors fled from the areas. As cited by [7], no meaningful development can be achieved in crisis prone environment, marred by insecurity. The Federal Government in its bid to check the insecurity initiated an amnesty program among other interventionist programs which never yielded desired result, and consequently the

government started returning fire for fire by constituting a military operation code-named Operation ‘Crocodile Smiles’, which the militants and many analysts still feel is not the answer to the problem of insecurity in the region.

However, coronavirus disease which broke out in the Wuhan City of China in 2019 referred to as COVID-19 Pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), after spreading to many countries across the world at the same in 2020. Coronavirus which was first confirmed in Nigeria on 27th February, 2020 when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive has disrupted activities and changed way of life among the citizens due to its virulent/infectious nature. In an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus, the Nigeria government initiated some drastic measures which included movement restrictions, total lockdown of some states and shutdown of inter-state borders including land, air and sea borders, as the virus began to spread speedily. In Niger Delta region, the Governors of the nine states that make up the region declared lockdown in many cities and enforced shutdown of inter-state borders to restrict movements. This crippled social, cultural and economic activities in the region, and inflicted untold hardship on the people. While efforts were made to provide palliatives in form of food items and little cash to residents to cushion the impact of the lockdown, many complained of the palliatives not getting to them, thereby worsening the difficulty to cope with the situation. Consequently, there were widespread concerns that crimes have sprung up in many places as criminals were exploiting the lockdown to intimidate people and perpetrate crimes. Different agitations and protests occasioned by non-provision of palliatives and other issues broke out with the attendant consequences on security. This study examines if the period of emergence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the region has presented different security threats as a result of restrictions and interstate lockdowns put in place to contain the spread of the virus across states.

Purpose of the Study

The study examines the security threats experienced in the Niger Delta region during the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. The specific objectives were:

1. Identify the security threats witnessed in the region within the first 5 months period of the pandemic (January-May,2020)
2. Identify the security threats witnessed in the region within the last 5 months period before the pandemic (August-December,2020)
3. Compare the security threats 5 months before and during the pandemic in the region
4. Map at risk locations of the prevailing security threats amidst the coronavirus pandemic in the region.

Research Questions

1. What are the security threats witnessed in the region 5 months before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic?
2. What are the security threats witnessed in the region 5 months during the pandemic?
3. Is there relationship in the security threats witnessed in the region for both periods?
4. Which areas/locations are at risk of the security threats in the region?

Methods and Materials

Study Area

The study area is the Niger Delta region. The one chosen was the

political Niger Delta region which includes Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers States. The Niger Delta with an estimated size at 70,000km² is among the World’s largest deltas. It sits in the Central part of the Southern Nigeria above latitude 5°33’49”N and 6°31’38”E in the North. Its Western boundary is given as Benin 5°44’11”N and 5°03’49”E and its Eastern boundary is Imo River 4°27’16”N and 7°35’27”E. Figure 2.2 portrays map of Niger Delta. It is located along the Atlantic coast which forms the southern boundary of Nigeria, marking the entrance of Rivers Niger and Benue into the ocean through a network of rivers, creeks, and estuaries. Being the leading wetland in Africa and the third largest in the world, it covers 2370 square kilometres of rivers, creeks and estuaries. Its vegetation is made up of forest with 8600 square kilometres of swamp forest and about 1900 square kilometres of mangrove forests [8]. The region is located southern Nigeria, is bounded eastward by the Republic of Cameroun and southward, by the Atlantic Ocean. Within the country, the region is described both in geography and politics with the later being for revenue sharing purposes. The region is located along the Atlantic coast which forms the southern boundary of Nigeria. The region has an estimated area of 70,000 square kilometers and is one of the largest deltas. It represents 12% of Nigeria’s total surface area [9].

The traditional economic activities can be classified as:-Land based type on the drier portions of the northern end of the Delta, which includes farming, fishing, collecting and processing of palm fruits and hunting; and Water based type of economy at the Southern Delta, including fishing, gathering of sea foods, and trading, with a less diversified economy. The crises of environmental dilapidation are related to the factors:

- Rapid population growth
- Oil exploration
- Consumption variety of goods
- Growing levels of industrialized activities
- Inefficient use of farmland through bush fallowing
- Other forms of uncontrolled exploitation of nature’s resources.

The major non-renewable resources include fossil fuels, petroleum products and construction resources.

Renewable resources include water resources, timber, pole wood, fuel wood, and edible vegetables.

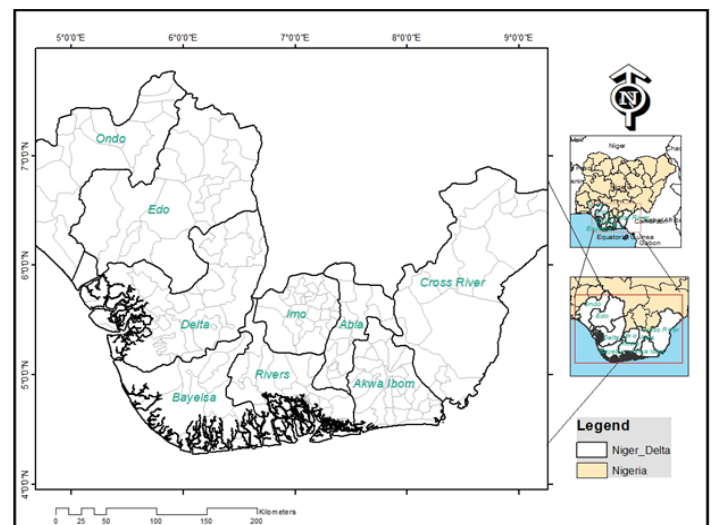


Fig.1. Study Area

This study relied on data derived from Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) website which is publically available for use. Gathering of data began in 1997 but the analysis of this work concentrated mainly on events of 2019 and 2020. This source of data reports information on exact location, date, group names, interaction type, event type, reported fatalities and other characteristics of politically violent events [10]. It focuses on tracking a range of violent and non-violent actions by political agents, including governments, rebels, militias, communal groups, political parties, rioters, protests and civilians. In this research, violence against civilians includes rape, torture, sea piracy attack and abduction of unarmed civilians while battles includes organized armed groups rising up against each other or against government security forces. Strategic developments are important events which may contribute to a state's political disorder and/or may trigger future events. It includes arrest of key political figures, mass arrests, lootings, destruction of property and strike actions. GIS was used to analyze the data.

Literature Review

Insecurity in Niger Delta

Crime and violence masterminded by criminals have threatened the means of living of residents. In Niger Delta region most of the crimes are perpetrated by youths. In recent past, gun-related killings heightened, with beheading of victims and setting residences ablaze taking a center stage in violent clashes carried out by gangs mainly youths. Although yet clear as to the extent, it remains a long-lasting. Hardly will a day pass without any incident of cult related gang clashes or killings thus affecting both socio-economic and security situations as it makes people feel unsafe and leave in fear. Many rural dwellers are meant to abandon their homes and villages and flee to cities appearing safe and secure to them. The high rate of abduction/kidnapping, armed robbery, sea piracy, militancy, rape, theft, pipeline vandalism and incessant killings are attributable to youth restiveness. [4] Affirmed that ravaging effects of gang clashes has resulted in wanton destruction of prosperities, kidnapping, armed robbery, prostitution, drug abuse and protests among others. The depth of the violence reach deep into the areas, tapping into such complex conditions as poverty, ethnicity, joblessness and hopelessness. Hence, daily newspapers are awash with reports on community violence and destructions attributing them to escalation of gang violence. Also, media coverage of this phenomenon tends to focus on casualties but rarely explores the economic consequences and physical destructions on built environment.

Most communities in the region are at risk of one form of security threat or the other because they have cluster of gangs arising from militancy or agitation for resource control which has been a major source of conflict in the region. According to [11], when gangs cluster in neighborhoods or communities, a number of negative conditions may arise including

- A greater level of criminal activity
- A large number of neighborhood youth involve in illegal behaviours
- Widespread availability and use of firearms and drugs
- A small level of neighborhood attachment (i.e, positive feelings of belonging and valued, and
- Incessant agitations or protests.

Unfortunately, Thrasher (2000) regretted that in most distressed neighborhoods, schools, churches, and other community agencies and institutions do not provide adequate gang prevention and intervention service.

Work in Dubai, showed that socially vulnerable community has weak family structure, lack leadership for decision making and conflict resolution, unequal participation in making decisions, weak or no community organizations, and another where people are discriminated on racial, or ethno-religious basis. The study identified other social factors of vulnerability to crime to include culture, tradition, religion, economic standard, and politics, inferred the vulnerability is greatest within the downtrodden in developing areas, owing to paucity of idea and resources for appropriate measures. It concluded that within this group, children, women and those aging are seen as most susceptible. Noted that youths are mostly noted for involving in many types of crimes including cultism, kidnapping, armed robbery, and involvement in riots due to their vulnerability since they are excluded and not mobilized for economic development [12]. The research identified lack of functional and job oriented education, consequences of bad government policies which make them unemployed; incidence of ghost workers in workforce which block their employment opportunities and favoritism as factors worsening vulnerability to crimes which constituent security threats. Economic diversification and youth engagement in policy making were put forward as ways of lessening their vulnerability to crimes.

These were corroborated by Fergusson, Swain-Campbell and [13]. Who observed that socio-economic disadvantaged youths have propensity to committing violent crimes. The authors opined that crime prevalent amongst young people from socio-economically disadvantaged families reflect a life course stage in which adverse family, individual, school, and peer factors combine to increase individual susceptibility to crime. While carrying a research in India, Arora, Shah, Chaturvedi and [14], disclosed that youths have a tendency of involvement in high-risk behaviours such as terrorism, gangsterism, and cultism following the numerous factors influencing their vulnerability. They identified the factors to include poverty and non available social support. Those vulnerable youths identified as mainly influenced are:

- Street youths
- Young youths in worst forms of child labour
- Young youths/children affected by armed conflict
- Youths affected by terminal ill health like HIV/AIDs
- Youths living with disability, and
- Local orphans

As stated in the research, many vulnerable young people fall into multiple categories, but but those mostly affected are ones in household in where a person or more is ill, dying or deceased, who live in households that receive orphans, whose caregivers are incapacitated to look after them; and the ones residing with very old and frail caregivers. The research therefore recommended for urgent social protection programs to be initiated so as to minimize the high prevalence of extreme poverty and chronic illness to reduce young people vulnerability. However, there is the general believe that the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has worsened poverty level, increased hunger and heightened security threats.

Emergence of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

According to [15], cases of Pneumonia unknown to etiology was reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China in December, 2019. As revealed by [16], the acute respiratory illness which was discovered in China was later confirmed as novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on 17th January, 2020. The virus is the same member of the coronavirus family that caused the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) reported in China in 2003, and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) reported in

Saudi Arabia in 2012. Researchers suspect the virus came from the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan where wild animals were being sold illegally. However, a study by Harvard showed no direct connection to the market for 14 individuals including the first known case of COVID-19, leaving open the possibility of alternate points of origin of the infection [15]. The detection of the new virus in humans without knowing the source of infection increased concern over the outbreak and the difficulty in getting a cure or vaccine. Meanwhile, the outbreak has kept spreading. As a result, the WHO through its Director General, Dr Tedros Adhanoni Ghebreyesus declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30th January, 2020. Due to the observed alarming spread of the COVID-19, and the accompanying severity on humans as well as the visible inactions that resulted in the proliferation of cases to more than 118,000 infections in more than 114 countries with over 4,291 deaths, the WHO on 11th March, 2020 declared the coronavirus a pandemic.

A pandemic is a disease that is spreading in multiple countries around the world at the same time. WHO generally defined a pandemic as a disease that has become widespread around the world, with an impact on the society. The term has been applied to only a few diseases in history such as a deadly flu in 1918, the H1N1 flu in 2009 and HIV/AIDS among them [17]. The declaration of the coronavirus a pandemic prompted countries to take increasing dramatic measures to slow down its spread. For example, Italy's Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte announced the closure of shops, restaurants, bars, cafes among others that could not guarantee a meter distance between customers. This is in addition to other restrictions initiated. Also, US President, Donald Trump initially announced a sudden restrictions on travels to the United States from Europe and later closed the borders and imposed a total ban on travels into United States from other countries. This was part of efforts to control the spread of the virus to countries. Notwithstanding, the spread of the virus has continued unabated and the rate of infections among humans worsened. Consequently upon the deteriorating nature of the situation, the WHO alarmed that countries were not working quickly and aggressively enough to fight the virus and that the measures put in place might have come too late. COVID-19 impacts the elderly and those with preexisting health conditions most severely.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 has continued to impact the world, devastating lives and the means of livelihood of people. WHO has been working closely with global experts, governments and partners to quickly advance scientific knowledge on the new virus in order to track the spread and virulence of the virus, and to provide advice to countries and individuals on measures to protect health and prevent the spread of the disease. As observed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns have led to unprecedented economic costs around the world [18]. Millions of Americans have filed for employment benefits, an indication that jobs have been lost across the globe. This is seen in other countries thereby contracting their Gross Domestic Products (GDPs). The implication will be a rise in crimes and criminality. Imposition of restrictions and stay at home orders by respective governments in order to control the virus spread further compound the hardship and hamper resilience and could elongate recovery period.

In Nigeria and the Niger Delta in particular, recovery from the pandemic may take longer than necessary following the high rate of poverty, lack of infrastructure/ basic amenities, high illitera-

cy level and over reliance on tradition, culture and religion. This could offer opportunity for emergence of new crimes and a rise in existing ones as people strive to subsist. Also, the restrictions imposed inflicted residents with numerous challenges that made life difficult for them. Residents complained that in many occasions, the declaration of lockdowns in cities was done abruptly without giving them time to prepare and secure basic needs of life such as food stuff and money. Some noted that in most cases, declarations were done late at night and wake up in the morning to hear that a total lockdown has been imposed. Moreover, some lamented of not having electricity and DSTV subscriptions, cooking gas or kerosene, fuel to power their generating sets at home, drinking sachet or bottle water among other needs. The scarcity of food triggered widespread burglary, stealing and riots. Although security agencies are working to keep the region safe from security threats such as terrorism, kidnapping, protests, cybercrimes, riots, sea piracy, and armed robbery among others, criminals may try to 'weaponize' the virus by deliberately trying to infect others or accelerate commission of crimes which plans were already in the pipeline.

Results and Discussion

Security Threats Witnessed in the Region Within the First Five Months of the Pandemic (January-May, 2020).

The research shows that violence against civilians, battles, riot, protest, strategic development, and explosion were major security threats witnessed in the region within the period. As shown in fig 4.1, violence against civilians was the highest security threat with 154 cases. This is followed by battles with 84 cases, riots with 81 cases, protest with 80 cases, strategic development with 20 cases and explosion with 2 cases.

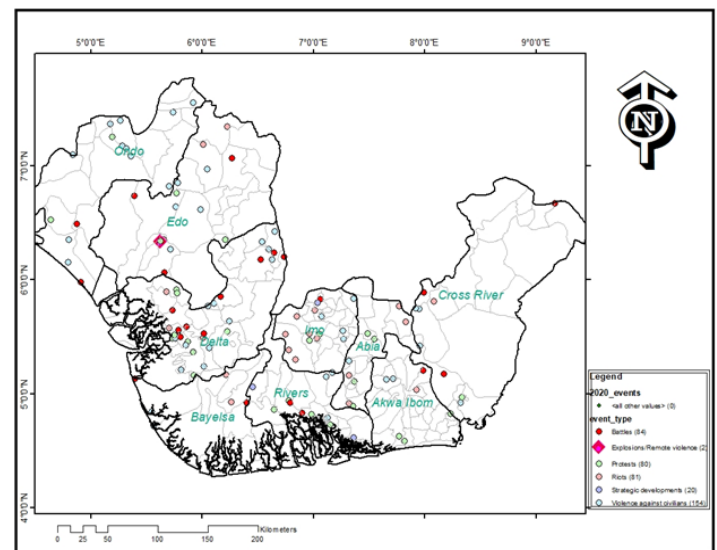


Fig 4.1 Mapping of Security Threats Witnessed in Niger Delta Within the First Five Months of the Pandemic (January-May, 2020).

Security Threats Witnessed in the Region Within the Last Five Months prior to the Pandemic (August-December, 2019).

From fig 4.2, result shows that the major security threats experienced in the region five months prior to the pandemic were primarily battles, violence against civilians, riot, protest and strategic development. Out of these threats, violence against civilians occu-

pies the first position with 104 cases while acts of protests with 112 cases, battles with 92 cases, riots with 39 cases and strategic development with 24 cases occupy the second, third, fourth and fifth positions respectively. Meanwhile, it was found that the period did not witness any form of explosion.

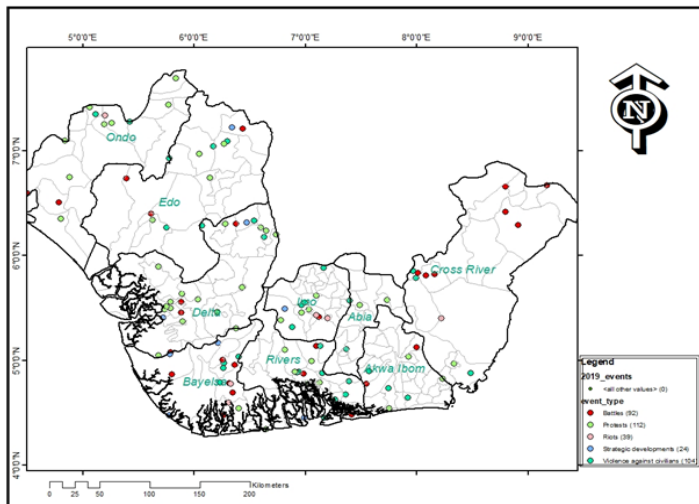


Fig 4.2 Mapping of Security Threats Witnessed in the Region Within the Last Five Months prior to the Pandemic (August-December, 2019)

Comparison of Security Threats in the area Before (August-December, 2019) and During the Pandemic (January-May, 2020)

From the results as illustrated in fig 4.3, bomb explosion was the only new threat witnessed in the region. The incident occurred during the coronavirus period. Notwithstanding, incidents of agitation which include riots and protests were higher during the coronavirus period than before the disease. This would have been occasioned by the impact of restrictions and lockdown measures imposed by government to mitigate the spread of the virus. People felt they have been denied of their rights being confined only in their houses, preventing them from hustling to meet their daily needs and restricting their freedom without providing them with commensurate palliatives or succour. Thus, their resort to different forms of agitations in the form of protests and riots. It is assessed that the high incidents of protests and riots could fuel community transmission of the coronavirus in the region. Also, security threats such as violence against civilians which in this study includes rape, sea piracy attack, abduction and torture was higher during the coronavirus period than before. This is assessed to have been precipitated by movement restrictions and inadequate security coverage of some areas which were exploited by criminals to perpetrate crimes on the innocent citizens who were mostly at home or within their neighbourhoods following closure of offices, businesses and hotels. It is adjudged that the region is still at high risk of such security threats if security coverage is not expanded and extended to remote areas and communities.

Moreover, this research finds that strategic developments such as arrest of people, lootings, destruction of properties and strike or industrial actions lowered during the pandemic than before. This is

attributable to the low level of social and economic activities in the region as a result of the pandemic. Similarly, battles including attacks by armed gangs or cult groups either in form of inter or intra gang/cult clashes or armed battles between security agencies and gangs/cultists declined during the pandemic than before the pandemic. This is attributed to the movement restrictions and ban on social/cultural activities which reduced activities of armed gangs/cultists who usually carry out their activities during social, cultural or traditional events in the region.

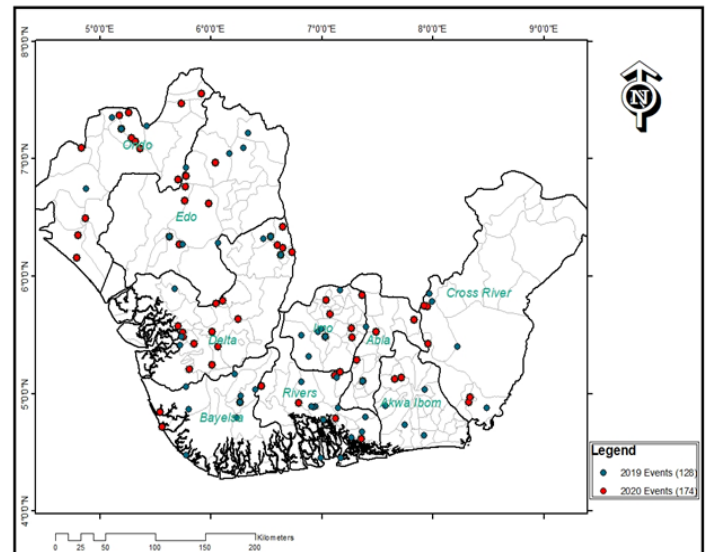


Fig 4.3 Map comparing Security Threats in the area Before (August-December, 2019) and During the Pandemic (January-May, 2020)

Conclusion

This research concludes that the coronavirus pandemic presented more security threats of agitations and violence against civilians including rape, torture and sea piracy among others in the Niger Delta Region due to restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the pandemic. This is because the restrictions caused people to shut their businesses and sources of income, thereby increasing hardship, lack and their suffering. The increase in cases of protests and agitations predisposes the area to high risk of community transmission of the coronavirus. Moreover, the region is still at risk of the identified threats despite the easing of the restrictions and rolling out of palliatives to stimulate the economy. On the other hand, violent clashes, battles for supremacy or control of an area by gangs, inter/intra cult clashes and armed battles plummeted during the pandemic as a result of low level of social, cultural, and economic activities

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that adequate security coverage be extended to remote areas, waterways and residences to enable check criminality. Also, drastic measures should be taken against acts of rape and abduction by ensuring that perpetrators are prosecuted and meant to face the law. In the same vein, government should put up measures to control and reduce

protests and riots, and ensure enforcement of strict compliance to non-pharmaceutical measures of mitigating the spread of the virus to avoid fuelling community transmissions. Additionally, government should ensure that adequate palliatives or rescue packages are released and proportionally allocated to achieve speedy stimulation and reviving of the economy so as to reduce unemployment, joblessness, food scarcity, poverty and hunger, as well as to shorten the pandemic recovery period.

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