

Oil, Arms and Violence in Africa

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February 2003

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The possession of oil resources, and the revenues that accrue to governments from the exploitation of this resource, have had a decisive impact on the security and stability of nearly every African country that has significant amounts of oil. This has been true in the past and oil is certain to have a similar impact on those countries where it is only now being discovered and exploited.

Countries without oil certainly can become militarized and experience conflict with their neighbors or serious internal violence, but the possession of oil resources has unique consequences for national security and internal stability. This is due to the special characteristics of oil production. On the one hand, oil production is capital intensive; it can only be undertaken only by companies willing to invest immense amounts of capital and, thus, requires the cooperation of central governments willing and able to protect these large foreign investments. On the other hand, oil production yields vast revenues for African governments. This allows them to make large arms purchases, to build up their military forces, and to strengthen internal security forces. However, it also can lead to internal political conflict and violence because it increases the stakes of political competition and encourages rival leaders and parties to resort to the use of force to gain control of the oil revenues.

Moreover, because oil revenues are managed by central governments that are often neither democratic nor financially

transparent, the money generated by oil production often does not contribute to national economic development, but is instead diverted into the bank accounts of government officials or used to finance unnecessary prestige projects. The misuse of oil revenues exacerbates political discontent and can provoke internal political violence. Finally, because oil production is often carried out with few, if any, environmental controls, it can have a devastating effect on people living in the oil-producing areas, thus further aggravating public unrest. As the following cases illustrate, oil production does not always cause militarization and violence, but it usually has a negative impact on the security and stability of those countries that have large oil resources.

Angola

Oil was a major factor in the civil war that engulfed Angola from 1975 until 2002. The vast revenues that the MPLA government received from U.S. oil companies involved in offshore oil production made it possible for the government to finance the purchase of massive quantities of sophisticated military hardware, including combat aircraft and tanks, from the former Soviet Union and other countries. The ability of the government to finance its own arms purchases became even more vital after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, after which the MPLA government had to pay for all of its arms in cash. The acquisition of large quantities of advanced weaponry allowed

government forces to contain, if not defeat, the forces of Jonas Savimbi's UNITA movement and, ultimately, to reach a peace agreement with UNITA after Savimbi's death. The government's access to oil revenues and UNITA's access to revenues from the production of diamonds permitted both sides to continue the devastating civil war for so many years without making any serious attempt to reach a political resolution of the conflict. Furthermore, the MPLA government failed to use its oil revenues for economic development, leaving the Angolan people poor and starving. And, according to a recent United Nations report, much of the oil revenue was actually diverted into the pockets of government officials. Global Witness, an advocacy group, says that \$770 million in tax revenue is missing, citing a discrepancy between what the Angolan Ministry of Petroleum reported paying in 2000 and what the Finance Ministry reported receiving. U.S. officials estimate that Angolan officials siphon off as much as \$1 billion in oil revenues each year.

Sudan

Oil has played a central role in the civil war in Sudan since it began in 1983. The oil-producing area of Sudan is located in the southern part of the country and the competition for control over these resources was one of the main causes of the rebellion by the SPLA. The government has therefore concentrated its forces in the oil-producing area and used terror and violence to force local people to flee the region. In addition, the government has used oil revenues to finance massive arms purchases—primarily from China—and, more recently, to establish its own military industries to produce light weaponry and ammunition. While the central government of Sudan has been willing to discuss the future status of southern Sudan with the SPLA in recent

negotiations, it has made it clear that it intends to maintain control over the oil fields and will not share oil revenues with the south. Control over the oil fields and the allocation of oil revenues thus remain the main obstacles to a peaceful settlement of the conflict (for more on this, see Jemera Rone, "Sudan: Oil and War," in this issue).

Republic of Congo

Oil also played a central role in the civil war in the Congo Republic from 1993-1994 between forces loyal to President Pascal Lissouba and those loyal to the former head of the military government, General Denis Sassou-Nguesso, and the continuing violence in the country since then. Although essentially a conflict between the leaders of rival ethnic groups, the civil war also took the form of a proxy war between rival U.S. and French oil companies. The French national oil company (now TotalFinaElf) had a longstanding relationship with General Sassou-Nguesso during his years in office and funded the creation of his private army, which ultimately took control over most of the country. President Lissouba, on the other hand, had begun to open up the country's oil fields to exploitation by a U.S. oil company, Occidental Petroleum, which helped fund and equip Lissouba's troops. Although General Sassou-Nguesso's forces were victorious, insurgents continue to oppose the government and the country remains highly unstable.

Nigeria

As the first, most populous, and, by far, largest single oil-producing country in Africa, Nigeria has been deeply affected by the possession of vast oil resources in many ways. To begin with, oil revenues have made it possible for the Nigerian armed forces to pay for major arms purchases,

including combat aircraft, tanks, armored vehicles, and naval vessels. Although many of the purchases were made in order to divert money into the pockets of military officers and did not always consist of the type of equipment that the Nigerians could maintain or use effectively, they did provide the country with a powerful military force. With these arms, and with the money from oil revenues, Nigeria has conducted major military interventions abroad, first in Liberia and then in Sierra Leone. While the record of Nigeria's troops has not always been particularly impressive, oil revenues have made it possible for Nigeria to act as West Africa's regional military hegemonic power and to play a significant role in conflicts throughout the region.

At the same time, however, quarrels with neighboring countries that challenge Nigeria's claims to oil in the Bakassi Peninsula and offshore have the potential to lead to armed conflicts with other countries, including Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé e Príncipe, and Cameroon. Although Nigeria has reached agreements with Equatorial Guinea and São Tomé regarding the distribution of revenues from offshore oil production, Nigeria has refused to accept an International Court of Justice decision giving control over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroon. Since there have been numerous clashes between Nigerian and Cameroonian troops in the disputed region for many years, the quarrel could easily lead to a major war between the two countries.

It is within Nigeria, however, that the impact of oil production has been felt most strongly. At the national level, struggles for the control of oil revenues have contributed to the persistence of military rule (as military leaders compete with each other and with civilian rivals), corrupted the political process, and undermined the development of

democratic political institutions. In the oil-producing region of southeast Nigeria, oil extraction has done enormous damage, disrupted social stability, and provoked extensive violence by government forces and in political conflicts between local peoples, without contributing much to regional economic development (for more on this, see Okechukwu Ibeanu, "(Sp)oil of Politics: Petroleum, Politics, and the Illusion of Development in the Niger Delta, Nigeria," in this issue). Indeed, foreign oil companies have sometimes purchased arms themselves and distributed them to Nigerian military units deployed in the Niger Delta to suppress local discontent.

Chad

Plagued by insurgency and civil war since it became an independent nation in 1960, Chad will soon become a major oil producer from oil fields in the Lake Chad basin. In 2000, the World Bank approved a \$3.7 billion loan to finance the construction of an oil pipeline by two American oil companies—ExxonMobil and Chevron—to transport the oil through Cameroon. The World Bank, under pressure from local, national, and international NGOs, imposed strict conditions on the use of oil revenues by the Chad and extracted promises from the government that the money would be used for economic development and social services. However, when the first payment of \$25 million was made to the government of President Idriss Deby in November 2000, it was disclosed that the Deby government had instead spent \$4 million of the money on arms to fight insurgent forces that continue to destabilize the country. The acquisition of oil revenues, thus, promises to prolong Chad's civil war and reduce the likelihood of a peaceful resolution of the conflict. And even though the oil companies involved in Chad have pledged to protect the

local environment and promote the economic development of the areas where the oil pipeline is currently been laid, oil production in Chad may well lead to the type of environmental, social, and political problems that have accompanied the development of oil resources in Nigeria and other countries.

Conclusion

As these cases indicate, the impact of oil resources can vary widely, depending upon a country's history, politics, and social structure. One additional case, Gabon, shows that, at least in certain circumstances, the possession of oil resources does not necessarily lead to militarization and violence. The absence of major oil-related problems in Gabon, however, appears to be due primarily to the ability of the government to manage political competition over the control of oil revenues and to refrain from making excessive arms purchases. As the current situation in Côte d'Ivoire (another country once cited for its peace and stability) demonstrates, political stability is highly precarious and can easily break down. Given the instability and lack of democracy in most African countries and the difficulty of solving political problems by peaceful means, possession of oil is certain to continue to promote the militarization of African countries and to provoke both internal and inter-state violence.