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Gangs Terrorize Nigeria's Vital Oil Region

By LYDIA POLGREEN

PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria — Rosemary Douglas has no connection to the oil business that pumps more than two million barrels of crude a day from beneath the swampy Niger Delta. But the violence surrounding it pierced her home in September anyway, when a bullet shattered her upper left arm as she napped with her 2-year-old daughter.

“I don't know why this happened to me,” she said, grimacing in pain as she gave a bewildered account of the gunplay that has engulfed her neighborhood and much of this oil-drenched city. “I mind my own business.”

The violence that has rocked the Niger Delta in recent years has been aimed largely at foreign oil companies, their expatriate workers and the police officers and soldiers whose job it is to protect them. Hundreds of kidnappings, pipeline bombings and attacks on flow stations and army barracks have occurred in the past two years alone.

But these days the guns have turned inward, and open battles have erupted with terrifying frequency on the pothole-riddled streets of this ramshackle city. The origins of the violence are as murky and convoluted as the mangrove swamps that snake across the delta, one of the poorest places on earth. But they lie principally in the rivalry among gangs, known locally as cults, that have ties to political leaders who used them as private militias during state and federal elections in April, according to human rights advocates, former gang members and aid workers in the region.

“What is happening now cannot be separated from politics,” said Anyakwee Nsirimovu of the Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Port Harcourt. “The cults are part and parcel of our politics. They have become part of the system, and we are paying in blood for it.”

The cults go by names that veer from the chilling to the improbable — like the Black Axe, the Klansmen, the Icelanders, the Outlaws and the Niger Delta Vigilante. Separate but not entirely distinct from the militant groups that have attacked the oil industry in the past, they represent a new, worrisome phase in a region that has been convulsed by conflict since oil was discovered here in 1956.

Since democracy returned to Nigeria in 1999, politicians across the country have used cults to intimidate opponents and rig votes. A [Human Rights Watch](#) report published in October concluded that the political system was so corroded by corruption and violence that, in some places, it resembled more a criminal enterprise than a system of government. The April elections were so brazenly rigged in some areas and so badly marred by violence that international observers said the results were not credible.

Nowhere is political violence more severe than here in the Niger Delta, where control over state government means access to billions of dollars in oil revenues and control of enough patronage for an army.

According to former gang members and human rights workers, the governing [People's Democratic Party](#) and some opposition parties employed cult members in the delta during the election, as they had in the two previous ones, which led to landslide victories for the governing party.

One powerful gang leader, Soboma George, was given the lion's share of patronage, they contend. Mr. George displayed his prowess in the months before the election by having his foot soldiers break him out of a city jail in a brazen assault. He then demonstrated his impunity by driving through the streets of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, in flashy cars, seemingly fearless of arrest.

The other gangs resented Mr. George's growing influence and control over lucrative security contracts, and a war between them has turned increasingly bloody. Caught in the middle have been all kinds of civilians; no one is off limits to the violence.

The elderly mother of the newly elected state governor was kidnapped and held for ransom in the spring. Toddlers related to senior government officials and business leaders have been seized to extract ransom payments or settle political disputes.

The violence reached such a pitch that at Teme Hospital here, surgeons from the aid group [Doctors Without Borders](#) struggled to keep up with a flood of 71 gunshot victims in just two weeks in August, and more than a month later they were still treating many people recovering from shattered bones and flesh wounds from the fighting.

Ibinabo Bob-Manuel, a 25-year-old college student, said she was at home with her aunt and 6-year-old sister, Lolo, on Aug. 16 when shooting broke out between soldiers and a gang that had occupied the area.

Four bullets pierced the fleshy part of her thigh, and one remained lodged inside. She lost so much blood that she passed out. The top half of a toe was blown off. Her sister was shot through her hands as she pressed her palms in prayer in the hail of bullets, Ms. Bob-Manuel said.

“We were bleeding and crying,” she said. “My auntie shouted, ‘You killed my family!’ I thought I would die.”

The government says it is cracking down on gangs, and it has sent an elite army unit into Port Harcourt and the surrounding areas to impose law and halt the violence. The gunplay in the city streets has since died down, but it is a tense, uneasy calm.

Many residents worry that rivalries may soon heat up again. On Oct. 25 a judicial panel removed the new governor of Rivers State, Celestine Omehia, ruling that he had not been an eligible candidate because he did not win his party’s primary. The winner of the primary, Rotimi Amaechi, was sworn in as governor, and many worry that violent clashes will ensue between their supporters.

The bloodshed has reached beyond the cities, deep into the creekside communities of the delta. In Ogbogoro the fights between rival gangs were so intense in August that the council of traditional rulers felt compelled to act. Two cults, the Debam and the Dewell, were fighting over political turf, oil and contracts for security work with oil services companies, according to local officials.

“No one could sleep in the town,” said Chief Clement Chuku, one of the traditional rulers of Ogbogoro. “Bullets were flying all night.”

The chiefs met to announce an ultimatum: all cult members had to leave or risk being arrested by vigilante youths from the community. The vigilantes rounded up a few members as examples, Mr. Chuku said, and were planning to turn them over to the military.

But just as a community meeting got under way in the town hall in early September, dozens of young men on motorbikes, carrying machine guns and grenade launchers, overran the meeting. Two traditional rulers were shot dead and their bodies were dumped on a weedy riverbank.

George Ogan, a retired doctor and church leader who has been trying to stem gang violence farther down the delta in his hometown, Okrika, where some of the most fearsome cults are based, said that such violence was completely bound up with politics.

“Our politicians cannot stand on their own, so they find those who will stand with guns for them,” Dr. Ogan said.