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Counting the Cost: Unpacking the Nigerian State Kinetic Approach in the Management of Crude Oil Theft and Its Environmental Implications in Niger-Delta Region

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Abstract

While extensive literature exists on the causes and effects of crude oil theft in Nigeria, limited scholarly work has examined the environmental consequences of the state's militarized strategy against this crime in the Niger Delta. This research therefore analyzes the environmental effects of incinerating locations and vehicles connected to illegal oil bunkering and refining. Drawing on environmental security theory and utilizing data from documentary sources and key informant interviews, the study finds that the practice of burning artisanal refinery sites and transportation means for stolen oil has severe environmental repercussions for the region. A key recommendation is for the Nigerian government to immediately cease such methods; instead, confiscated petroleum products should be sold, with the revenue accruing to the state.

Keywords: *Crude Oil Theft, Kinetic Approach, Environment, Pollution, Military, Nigeria.*

INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of commercially viable crude oil in Oloibiri (now in Bayelsa State) in 1956, this resource has become Nigeria's principal source of foreign exchange, accounting for more than 85% of national earnings (Onuoha, Ezirim & Enyiazu, 2017). Indeed, despite attempts at economic diversification, oil remains the bedrock of the Nigerian economy (Wilson, 2012).

However, the theft of crude oil in the resource-rich Niger Delta continues to cripple Nigeria's potential revenue from oil production. OPEC data indicates Nigeria has fallen from the top to the fourth position among African oil producers, trailing Angola, Algeria, and Libya, primarily due to oil theft. This decline is driven by the daily loss of over 200,000 barrels of crude to theft, rendering Nigeria unable to meet half of its OPEC production quota (Obiezu, 2022).

Although the precise origins of crude oil theft are unclear, academic sources indicate it became a national issue in the early 2000s when militants from the Niger Delta began attacking oil infrastructure to compel the government to address regional grievances (Ikelegbe, 2006).

Crude oil theft has evolved into a profitable enterprise involving sophisticated criminal networks. These networks sabotage oil installations, operate illegal refineries, and transport stolen products using cans, barges, and ships to buyers (Baird, 2010).

The phenomenon involves the unauthorized appropriation and use of crude or refined petroleum by state and non-state actors, either independently or in collaboration, for private

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benefit. It manifests primarily as oil bunkering, pipeline vandalism, fuel scooping, and oil terrorism (Onuoha, Ezirim & Enyiazu, 2017).

As a result of these criminal activities, Nigeria lost over 619.7 million barrels of crude oil, valued at more than N16.35 trillion, between 2009 and 2020 (Omolaoye). A Senate Ad-hoc Committee on Crude Oil Theft reported that in just the first eight months of 2022, the country lost over $2 billion to this illegal enterprise (Aro, 2022). In fact, only 66% of the nation's oil output could be reliably accounted for and tracked (Eboh, 2022).

Former Vice President Yemi Osinbajo stated that Nigeria loses one million barrels of oil per day to theft, significantly impairing government functionality (Akinkuotu, 2016). This crisis led the former Senate President, Ahmed Lawan, to declare oil thieves as Nigeria's greatest enemies (Moyinoluwa, 2022). Projections suggest Nigeria could lose $23 billion in 2023 due to this issue (Aduloju, 2022).

In response, the Nigerian government has implemented various task forces, policies, and initiatives to confront oil theft. These include a Joint Task Force comprising the military, police, civil defense, and local actors; a Special Joint Task Force of oil and gas experts; a Presidential Panel; a Senate Ad-hoc Committee; amnesty programs for militants; awarding protection contracts to ex-militants; and the seizure and destruction of stolen crude (Onuoha, Iroezumuo & Onuoha, 2022).

Currently, a common measure used by security agencies and stakeholders is the burning of sites used for illegal refining and the vehicles transporting stolen crude. For instance, in March 2022, the Nigerian military dismantled 107 illegal refineries in the Niger Delta (Ogbaje, 2023). Similarly, the Army, in collaboration with the security company of ex-militant Government Tompolo, set fire to a vessel named MT Deima caught loading stolen oil (Saharareporters, 2022a).

Soldiers from the 144 Battalion in Abia State also incinerated at least six vehicles carrying stolen petroleum products (Saharareporters, 2022b). This practice of destroying sites and transport means has sparked debate. Senior Advocate Femi Falana argued that military rules of engagement do not permit such actions unless they are concealing complicity. Conversely, the Chief of Defence Staff, General Lucky Irabor, defended the tactic as a necessary response to a national security threat (Arise News, 2022).

This militarized approach, involving the burning of refining sites and vehicles, carries severe environmental consequences for the region, yet it has received limited scholarly attention. While there is abundant literature on the drivers and impacts of oil theft (Nwozor, et al., 2023; Ezirim, 2018; Boris, 2015; Akpomera, 2015; Ikelegbe, 2006) and on government counter-measures (Odoemene, 2018; Eke, 2016; Onuoha, Iroezumuo & Onuoha, 2022), few studies focus on the environmental implications of the state's kinetic strategy.

Although Ibeanu (2000) explored the links between state-community relations and the environmental effects of oil exploration, his work did not address the environmental costs of the state's anti-theft tactics.

Consequently, this study's primary objective is to investigate the environmental impacts of destroying illegal oil refining sites in the Niger Delta. The paper is structured into six parts: this introduction, a review of related concepts, an examination of state approaches, an application of the environmental security framework, a discussion of context and methodology, an analysis of the environmental costs, and finally, a conclusion with recommendations.

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Crude Oil Theft in Nigeria: Review of Related Literature

Crude oil theft has been a major subject of academic inquiry in Nigeria for over four decades, particularly since oil became the economic mainstay. Discussing its evolution and forms, Ikelegbe (2005, p.221) observed:

> Large-scale illegal local and international trade in crude oil exists in Nigeria. It has evolved from the activities of a few amateurs in the 1980s using rudimentary methods to extract oil from pipelines into a highly sophisticated industry employing advanced technology to tap crude and complex communication systems to navigate the numerous creeks and rivers. The syndicates have also progressed from using boats and barges to ships and large tankers on the high seas. Using advanced equipment, crude oil is extracted from company pipelines and terminals in waterways, creeks, swamps, and seas. Plastic pipes are attached to manifold points and pipeline intersections, from where oil is pumped into barges.

Similarly, Onuoha, Ezirim and Enyiazu (2017) highlighted a surge in illegal oil procurement and trafficking that has severely hampered Nigeria recently. They noted that what began as minor acts by aggrieved locals seeking a share of national wealth has transformed into a complex, organized network of local and international cartels plundering the nation's resources.

Numerous studies have explored the definitions, drivers, and consequences of crude oil theft (Onuh, et al, 2021; Ngada & Bowers, 2017; Onuoha, 2008; Ikelegbe, 2005). Regarding its definition, Onuoha, Irezumuo and Onuoha (2022) noted the concept varies. For example, Ugwuanyi (2013) defined it as the act of breaching pipelines or oil infrastructure to steal crude for refinement and sale abroad. Asuni (2009) described it as the collection of unaccounted crude from pipelines or flow stations for private gain without state remittance. While concise, these definitions miss some nuances. Offering a broader view, Ezirim (2018) suggested it is a generic term encompassing pipeline breaking, diversion, smuggling of crude, and loading products onto unauthorized vessels. Wizor and Wali (2020) posited that it includes pipeline vandalism, illegal processing, smuggling, and sale of stolen products. According to Onuoha, Irezumuo and Onuoha (2022), it is an illicit, multi-faceted process involving the extraction, export, and transaction of crude or refined products, significantly harming the Nigerian economy. These scholars identify three core, interrelated activities: pipeline vandalization, artisanal refining, and illegal bunkering. Specifically, pipeline vandalization involves illegally breaking pipelines and wellheads to steal oil; artisanal refining entails distilling petroleum using locally made tanks; and oil bunkering is the illegal loading of ships with illicit products.

Supporting this, Katsouris and Sayne (2013) identified three primary methods of oil theft in Nigeria. The first is siphoning oil from damaged pipelines, typically by local refiners supplying nearby communities. The second involves attaching plastic hoses directly to wellheads to divert oil into waiting ships or canoes. The third is the over-lifting of crude by licensed exporters, who falsify shipment documents to conceal the actual volumes being stolen.

Extant literature presents four dominant perspectives on the causes of crude oil theft. The first emphasizes socio-economic issues like extreme poverty, high unemployment, low living standards, and economic incentives. Scholars like Onuoha (2008) and Garuba (2010) argue that addressing poverty and unemployment in the region is key to solving the problem. However, Asuni (2009) contends that poverty alone cannot explain the high sophistication and resource planning involved. The second, a political economy perspective, represented by Nwajiaku-

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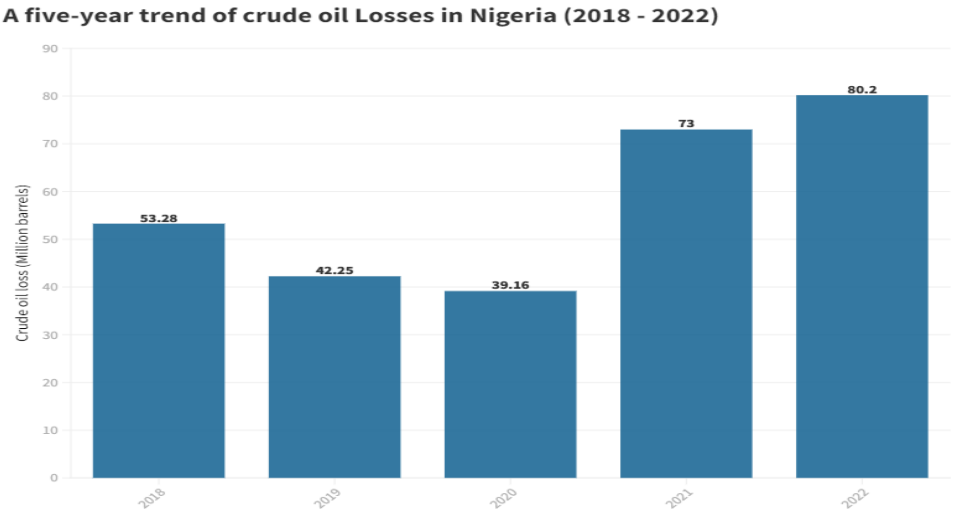
Dahou (2012), Asuni (2009), Collier and Hoeffler (2005), and Ikelegbe (2005), posits that economic gain is the primary driver. They argue that the profitability of oil theft has attracted highly organized local and international networks, including public and private sector actors. The third perspective is psychological, centered on an ownership mentality among locals who view the oil as a God-given resource. Ufuoma and Omoruyi (2014) suggested the belief that the state and multinational companies prosper at the locals' expense drives many to engage in theft. The fourth perspective focuses on politics, citing a lack of political will, weak security structures, and ungoverned spaces in the Niger Delta as contributors to the high incidence of theft (Idemudia & Ite, 2006; Lenshie, 2018).

The consequences of crude oil theft are vast but can be viewed from two broad angles. The first is its environmental impact. The activities of oil criminals leave a trail of devastation in oil-producing states and communities. Pits and wells dug to store stolen oil contaminate water sources and soil. According to The Nation (2022), in areas like Cawthorne Channel and Forupa, it is common to see oil gushing from broken pipes into barges and large, specially dug pits. This oil eventually flows into rivers. Furthermore, oil cartels construct makeshift refineries to illegally produce fuel and diesel. Due to unsafe methods, explosions sometimes occur, causing further damage to land and water habitats. Similarly, explosions during illegal bunkering have caused widespread loss of life and property. Emissions from artisanal refineries have been linked to impaired lactation and potential miscarriages among pregnant women in the region (Onyemachi, et al., 2024; Shittu, 2014). Residents near these refineries also risk damage to their central nervous systems, kidneys, and livers (Akpoghelie, Ugbuku, & Esemedafe, 2021).

The second major consequence is the economic impact on Nigeria. The Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (2023) reported a staggering loss of 619.7 million barrels of crude, valued at N16.25 trillion, to theft between 2009 and 2020. Partly due to theft, corruption, and mismanagement, the Nigerian economy is severely weakened. Onuoha, Irezumuo and Onuoha (2022) noted that while accurate data is scarce, an estimated 100,000 to 400,000 barrels of crude are stolen daily in the Niger Delta and resold in West Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe. This has forced companies like ExxonMobil, Shell, and Eni to shut down wells and scale back operations. Figure 1 shows the volume of crude oil lost in Nigeria between 2018 and 2022.



Source: Yusuf, 2022

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Further, Jeremiah (2025) cited data from the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) showing that nearly 353 million barrels were stolen from the Niger Delta between 2002 and 2025. This equates to roughly 56.1 billion litres or 1.2 million fuel tankers. At a price of $73 per barrel, this represents a $33.3 trillion loss to Nigeria. It is largely due to these severe economic and environmental consequences that the Nigerian state has employed various methods to tackle oil theft, which are discussed next.

The Nigerian State and the Management of Crude Oil Theft in the Niger Delta

The Nigerian state has utilized diverse strategies to address crude oil theft in the Niger Delta. These include deploying statutory law enforcement like the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), engaging Private Security Companies (PSCs) to protect infrastructure, implementing corporate security surveillance by oil companies, and deploying the military (Army, Airforce, Navy) to neutralize theft operations (Onouha, Ireozumuo & Onuoha, 2022). According to these authors, these organizations have had limited success in curbing theft due to corruption, complacency, the difficult terrain, and inadequate personnel and equipment. The table below lists the key agencies involved.

S/N	Name of the Agencies	Approach	Remarks
1	Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC),	While these two agencies are empowered to arrest and prosecute those involved in crude oil theft. They also employ force to destroy sites equipment, tools, among others involved in the illicit enterprise	These agencies have recorded enormous successes in the fight against crude oil theft in the Niger Delta. But issues of corruption, lack of adequately trained personnel and equipment, bad terrain, among others have hindered their efforts
2	Private Security Companies such as Tantita Security Services, Ocean Marine Solution, Global West Vessel Specialist Limited, etc	These companies owned mostly by Ex-militants and other influential Nigerians are recruited to protect critical crude oil infrastructure such as pipelines and oil wells. They mostly recruit locals who patrols the areas where these facilities are located. They have joined in destroying equipment involved in stolen crude.	While these organizations have co-opted many of the locals to protect crude oil facilities which have reduced crude oil theft to some extent, the politicization of their contracts and their alleged involvement in crude oil theft are some of the major challenges involved.
3	Corporate entities such as Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, Nigerian Extractive Industries Transparency Initiatives	These government owned organization and initiatives applies ethical and non-kinetic approach towards monitoring crude oil production. It seeks to apply global best practices (accountability and transparency) in the oil and gas sector.	Although, there is an improvement with regards to accountability and transparency in crude oil governance in Nigeria which led to a availability of data, these initiatives did not deter crude oil theft.
4	The Nigerian Military (Army, Naval and Airforce),	The military through its various Joint Taskforce (JTF) Operations has been at the forefront of combating crude oil theft in the Niger Delta. Burning of sites, equipment and tools involved in crude oil theft is their standard practice.	There are recorded successes of the JTF against crude oil theft in the region but issues ranging from corruption, rough terrain, among others have equally hindered their efforts.

Source: Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha (2022)

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Focusing on the NPF, Bakere and Aderinola (2019) identified it as the principal law enforcement agency responsible for maintaining law and order and protecting public property. Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha (2022) noted that with the rise in oil theft, the NPF, particularly its Marine Police unit, has been combating oil crimes and protecting infrastructure. Successive Inspectors-General of Police have operated a Special Task-Force on Anti-pipeline Vandalism that collaborates with other agencies. The NSCDC, a now-armed non-paramilitary organization, is also involved. Johnson (2019) stated that the NSCDC Act mandates it to protect oil sites, arrest those selling stolen crude, confiscate proceeds, and prosecute offenders. Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha (2022) acknowledged successes by both the NPF and NSCDC but also highlighted challenges like lack of community support, internal corruption, and inadequate equipment. Recently, both agencies have engaged in destroying illegal refining sites. For example, Oluwafemi (2025) reported that the NPF, with other agencies, destroyed 30 illegal refining sites, 55 ovens, 20 reservoirs, 50 pits, and 100,000 liters of stolen crude in Rivers State. Burning sites and vehicles has become a standard procedure.

Additionally, the state has contracted private corporations to protect oil infrastructure. Adibe et al., (2017) noted this began under President Goodluck Jonathan, who signed N5.6 billion Oil Pipeline Surveillance and Protection (OPSP) contracts with ex-militants like Government Tompolo. Nextier (2025) reported that in 2022, a N48 billion per year contract was awarded to a company owned by Tompolo. For Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha (2022), these contracts, while pacifying ex-militants, are shrouded in secrecy and corruption. The cancellation of OPSP contracts by President Buhari in 2015 led to a spike in pipeline vandalism between 2015 and 2016 (Adibe et al., 2017). These private companies have also adopted burning as a tactic, as seen when Tantita Security Services apprehended and destroyed a vessel carrying 800,000 liters of stolen crude (Saharareporters, 2022a).

Furthermore, the NNPC and NEITI have implemented largely non-kinetic measures to curb theft. Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha (2022) explained that using corporate frameworks like Transparency, Accountability, Performance and Excellence (TAPE), a Code of Conduct, and a Tip Portal, they aim to sanitize the sector. Tijani (2016) noted these measures monitor vessel movements and reduced staff involvement in theft. However, Wilson argued the method was costly and ineffective. Salem (2020) observed that despite adopting best practices, billions are still lost due to complicity from NNPC staff, government officials, the military, and contractors.

The Nigerian military has also been central to the fight against oil theft. Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha, (2022) stated that since the 1990s, the military has been the most prominent tool for protecting critical oil infrastructure. A Joint Taskforce (JTF) comprising the Army, Navy, Airforce, and other agencies has been at the forefront. Odemah (2012) reported that in 2012 alone, the JTF conducted 7,585 anti-bunkering patrols, leading to the arrest of 1,945 suspects and the destruction of 4,349 illegal refineries, 133 barges, 1,215 boats, 187 tankers, 178 illegal dumps, and 5,574 surface tanks. Onouha, Ireozumuo and Onuoha, (2022) observed that the JTF's burning of equipment and sites, intended as a deterrent, contributes to environmental degradation.

In summary, the dominant approach to combating oil theft in the Niger Delta is militaristic. While NNPC and NEITI use corporate surveillance, the destruction of sites, equipment, and vehicles is standard practice among all involved agencies. The Guardian (2023) warned that such scorched-earth tactics disregard the environment and negatively impact regional flora and fauna, constituting a serious ecological threat.

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Environmental Security Theory: A Framework for Understanding the Nigerian State Approach to Crude Oil Theft

This study is grounded in environmental security theory, associated with scholars like Arthur Westing (1989), Nina Graeger (1996), and Larry Swatuk (2014). The theory explores how environmental issues like deforestation, degradation, overfishing, and resource scarcity can lead to violent conflict and harm human well-being (Swatuk, 2014). Environmental security theory gained traction after the Cold War as scholars argued for broadening the concept of security to include environmental issues (Floyd, 2008). Read (2024) acknowledged that while the environment-security link has long existed, sustained academic and policy discourse on it began post-Cold War. Since then, it has become a valuable analytical tool globally (Dyer, 1996).

As an analytical framework, environmental security theory is multi-disciplinary, drawing from International Relations, Security Studies, Ecology, Peace and Conflict Studies, and Environmental Sciences. Mathews (1989) noted that linking environment and security sparked significant intellectual debate and publications both supporting and opposing the connection. The theory reflects a shift away from a purely state-centric view of security to incorporate threats from environmental change like pollution and deforestation.

The core logic of the theory is that environmental concerns like resource scarcity and pollution can cause conflict and undermine human welfare. Alumona and Onwuanabile (2019) argued that a harmful environment reveals the intricate link between ecology and security. A secure environment entails access to natural resources without ecosystem compromise, and human activities directly and indirectly impact the environment (Khagram, Clerk & Raad, 2003). The theory is concerned with protecting the environment for the thriving of humans, animals, and plants. In this study's context, the theory criticizes how the:

> Planned destruction of the natural environment; be it through herbicides, chemical bombs/agents, concussion bombs, forest fires or deliberate salinisation of arable land or freshwater reservoirs, for example, by breaking dams ..as an important part of the overall military strategy..... (Floyd, 2008, p.2).

Thus, environmental security theory focuses on how human activities threaten the environment, undermining ecosystems and life support systems. It provides insight into how the Nigerian state's kinetic approach to oil theft damages the Niger Delta's environment. Highlighting the region's ecological sensitivity, Ibeanu (2000, p.20) stated:

> The biodiversity of the Niger Delta is very high. The area contains diverse plant and animal species, including many exotic and unique flowers and birds. Implied in this ecology is that the Niger Delta is an easily disequilibrated environment.... In short, the Niger Delta is a very sensitive ecosystem. Not anymore.....The introduction of petroleum exploration and drilling in this very fragile environment, however, has had a devastating effect on the environment.

In short, the state's approach to managing oil theft has worsened the region's ecological destruction. The theory demonstrates that burning sites and equipment negatively impacts the environment, posing grave dangers for humans and undermining the entire ecosystem. Ultimately, destroying everything associated with stolen crude adversely affects farmlands, forests, aquifers, wildlife, and people (Ibeanu, 2000).

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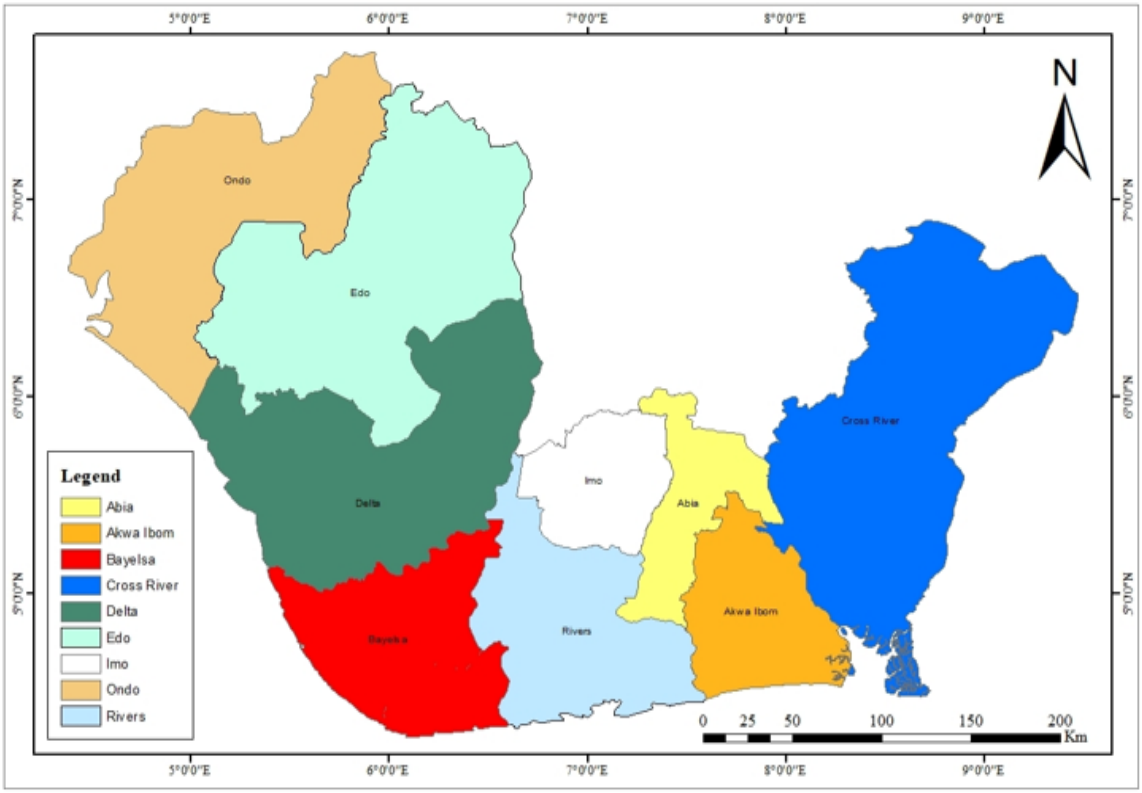
Study Context and Methodology

This study is set in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Covering 36,000 square kilometers, it is one of the world's largest wetlands and mangroves (Ibeanu, 2000). The region now includes states like Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa, Imo, Akwa-Ibom, Cross-River, Ondo, Edo, and Abia, containing 185 of Nigeria's 774 local government areas. It is home to over 40 ethnic groups speaking more than 100 languages and dialects.

The last official census recorded over 30 million people, with a density of 265 persons per square kilometer (Niger Delta Annual Conflict Report, 2021). The map below shows the region.

Ugbong (2025) Map of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria



Methodologically, this study employed a qualitative mixed-method design, specifically triangulating Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with documentary analysis. This approach was chosen to provide nuanced and balanced data collection and analysis (Morse, 2010), a method also used by Ibeanu (2000).

For the KIIs, four of the nine Niger Delta states—Rivers, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, and Bayelsa—were purposively selected as the core focus. Forty-one (41) experts and stakeholders were interviewed between January 2024 and August 2025.

These included ten (10) security personnel (two each from the NPF, NSCDC, Army, Airforce, and Navy), five (5) staff from environmental CSOs, five (5) academics, five (5) community leaders, five (5) indigenes, and one (1) staff from NOSDRA. Participants comprised thirty (30) males and eleven (11) females.

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States and participants were selected via purposive and judgemental sampling due to their high association with oil theft (Niger Delta Annual Conflict Report, 2021) and their knowledge of the subject. KIIs were conducted face-to-face or by telephone with participant consent and adherence to ethical standards.

The study also gathered documentary evidence on oil exploration, production, management, theft, and their environmental impacts from newspapers, think tanks, books, and journals focusing on Nigeria (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Using tables and figures, both data sources were continuously analyzed to support or challenge arguments in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2005).

The Environmental Cost of the Kinetic Approach in the Management of Crude Oil Theft in the Niger Delta

The Nigerian state's primary strategy for managing crude oil theft has been kinetic (Onouha, Ireozumuo & Onuoha, 2022). While non-kinetic efforts exist, such as using drones for surveillance and community sensitization programs (Chukwu, 2024), state security agencies and private security companies predominantly rely on force. This involves not only confiscating stolen products but also burning the theft sites, refining equipment, storage facilities, and transport vehicles (Ogbaje, 2023).

This militaristic approach has undoubtedly reduced theft and boosted Nigeria's oil production. A Nextier (2025) report noted Nigeria exceeded its OPEC quota of 1.5 million barrels per day for the third time in 2025, potentially surpassing 2020's 500 million barrels. Furthermore, NNPC's CEO, Bayo Ojulari, stated that nearly 100% of crude was being pumped through pipelines, indicating pipeline theft is nearly eradicated (Fakoyejo, 2025). Despite these gains, theft persists. According to Nextier (2025, p.3):

> Crude oil theft has remained high. Nigeria recorded unprecedented crude oil theft in the past five years, with over 90 million barrels of crude oil lost to crude oil theft between 2020 and May 2025. This stolen crude is estimated at over six billion dollars, based on a very conservative crude oil price of \$66 per barrel

Justifying the state's approach, former Chief of Defence Staff Lucky Irabor stated it is part of the rules of engagement, requiring no prior investigation. The NNPC also sanctioned this method, stating that destroying transport means is necessary in the war on theft (Business Day, 2025). A high-ranking JTF military officer in Rivers State echoed this during an interview:

> The kinetic approach is the best way to fight crude oil theft, a crime that threatens national security. With nearly 80% of revenue coming from oil, any sabotage must be dealt with harshly. The government has tried amnesty, skills acquisition, and scholarships, yet theft continues. This current approach has shown significant gains in curbing theft. We will burn down anything involved in oil theft, as mandated by the government. Nobody, equipment, or vehicle involved will be spared (Interview with Lt Col. Musa, a military personnel based in Rivers State).

Supporting the government's stance, the current Chief of Defence Staff, General Christopher Musa, argued that the scorched-earth approach is due to weaknesses in the legal system where offenders are inadequately punished and often return to the illicit trade (Oshunkeye, 2015). The table below shows instances where this approach has been applied.

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Table 2: Incidents of the Kinetic Approach in the Management of Crude Oil Theft

S/N	Cases of Kinetic Approach	Remarks	Sources
1	In a joint-operations that comprises various Nigerian security agencies that lasted between September 21 and 5 October 2025, 18 illegal bunkering sites were destroyed while 28 suspects were arrested in Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, and Akwa Ibom states.	Although success were recorded in the war against crude oil theft but the deployment of kinetic approach in the destruction of these illegal refineries constitute serious hazard to the environment	https://championnews.com.ng/2025/10/07/army-foils-efforts-by-oil-thieves-to-build-illegal-bunkering-hubs-in-ndelta-arrests-28-suspects.
2	On May 19, 2025, the NSCDC through its Commandant General's Special Intelligence Squad (CG'S SIS), discovered and destroyed over 3,000 liters of stolen crude oil in Obuzor-Asa, Ukwa West LGA Abia State.	NSCDC noted that the stolen crude was packaged in polythene bags. The released of over 3,000 litres of crude oil into the environment constitute serious threats to plants, animals and humans that resides in that area.	https://web.facebook.com/NSCDC/posts/commandant-generals-special-intelligence-squad-cgs-sis-discovers-and-destroys-ov/1025429506393879/?_rdc=1&_rdr#
3	The Punch newspaper reported that in March, 2024, the Nigerian Airforce bombed two illegal refining sites at Karkama and Temakiri all in Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State.	The Nigerian Airforce recorded that through this approach, crude oil theft has reduced in the region. But this scorched earth tactics was done without regards for the environment.	https://punchng.com/military-bombs-seven-illegal-refineries-in-rivers/
4	In December 2023, the Punch newspaper noted that the Nigerian Airforce conducted airstrikes that destroyed illegal refining sites numbering up to six at Opu-Arugbana in Degema Local Government Area, Rivers State.	This approach led to the destruction of the already polluted eco-system in the area. The Nigerian Airforce airstrikes was done without consideration for the environment.	https://punchng.com/military-bombs-seven-illegal-refineries-in-rivers/
5	On 13th of September, it was reported that the Nigerian Navy arrested and burnt a vessel known as Cecelia Imo that carried 350,000 liters of stolen refined Automotive Gas Oil (AGO) in Woji, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State.	This vessel was burnt without regards for the legal and environmental implications. The owner of the vessel alleged that it was not carrying stolen products.	https://guardian.ng/opinion/crude-oil-theft-and-imperative-for-due-process/
6	On the 21st of July, 2023, the Nigerian Military reported that through its JTF, Operation Delta Safe, 22 illegal refineries, 15 wooden boots, 34 storage tanks, 96 ovens and 16 dugouts pits were all destroyed in an operations that lasted for two weeks	The military claimed that through this operation alone, it foiled the stealing of over 200 million naira worth of crude oil. Also, 60 criminal were arrested as a result of the above. No doubt, this destruction undermined the ecosystem of that area	https://punchng.com/military-destroys-23-illegal-refineries-arrests-60-oil-thieves/
7	On July 11, 2023, it was reported that a combine team	This vessel carried 150, 000 Metric Tons of Crude oil that	https://thenationonlineng.net/intercepted-vessel-

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	of both state security agencies (JTF, Operation Delta Safe) and a private security outfit (Tantita) caught and destroyed a vessel known as MT TURA II (IMO number: 6620462), in Delta State	is valued at 86.6 million dollars. It was caught on its way to Cameroon from Nigeria. On board the vessel was 11 Nigerians and 1 Ghanaian. The vessel was destroyed without regards for the environment.	destroyed-in-delta-had-150000-mts-of-crude-worth-86-8m/
8	October, 2022, it was reported that Nigerian security forces destroyed a vessel named MT DEIMA which contained 1500 metric tons of stolen crude oil in the Warri Escravos River.	This was done without regards for the environment. Its impact on the aquatic environment was not taken into consideration.	https://punchng.com/stop-burning-vessels-with-stolen-crude-oil-lawmakers-warn-security-agencies/

Sources: Various Media Houses

The incidents above are just a few examples where the kinetic approach was used without environmental regard. On its legality, Senior Advocate Femi Falana, citing the Armed Forces Act, stated:

> There is no provision in the rules of engagement that authorizes military personnel or security operatives to set fire to or destroy vessels loaded with stolen crude.....the burning of a ship or vessel by a military personnel is a serious offence, which attracts life imprisonment without an option of fine (The Guardian, 2nd November, 2022, n.p).

Similarly, maritime security expert Captain Alfred Oniye questioned the approach, noting it destroys evidence before investigations on ownership, contents, loading point, and clearances are complete (Onyenucheya, 2023).

Conversely, Emmanuel Jakpa, legal representative for Tompolo's Tantita Security, defended the tactic, citing the Hydrocarbons Oil Refining Act which empowers security officers to confiscate and destroy equipment used in illegal refining (Freshangle, 2022).

Regardless, the environmental impacts are severe. Combating oil theft has significantly damaged the environment. Bombing illegal refineries and destroying vessels and vehicles has destroyed agricultural land and fishing grounds, threatening livelihoods and community well-being (Ibeanu, 2000). While reducing theft and increasing production (Nextier, 2025), this approach releases dangerous chemicals into an environment already polluted by oil exploration. An interviewed environmental scientist noted:

> The Niger Delta environment is already affected by gas flaring, oil spills, and other degradation undermining its ecosystem. The water, air, and land are heavily contaminated with hydrocarbons and hazardous chemicals dangerous to humans, animals, and plants...Using this kinetic approach is like adding salt to injury...Its environmental impact is enormous and should not be trivialized (Interview with Prof. S.T Sominatari, an academic based in Rivers State).

Similarly, the NGO Health of Mother Earth Foundation criticized destroying vessels without considering the right to a safe environment, noting a single drop of crude can contaminate 25 liters of water, let alone 800,000 barrels released into a polluted environment (Punch, 2023). Hon. Thomas Ereyitomi, a House of Representatives member, condemned the practice, stating: "setting ablaze stolen crude oil laden vessels will further destroy the well-endowed ecosystem of the Niger Delta region already ravaged by oil exploration...ultimately

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further affect the livelihood and the overall wellbeing of the people of the area" (Nwabughiogu, 2023, n.p).

This approach is an environmental security threat to the Niger Delta, a region renowned for biodiversity. It comprises four ecological zones: mangrove forests, lowland rainforests, freshwater swamp forests, and coastal barrier islands, supporting abundant aquatic and terrestrial species, many endangered (Ogbeibu & Oribhabor, 2023). The IUCN (2018) reported the Delta hosts endangered primates like Sclater's guenon, the Niger Delta red colobus, and the Cross River Gorilla. A 2005 study found 500 bird species, 219 fish species, 85 mollusk species, 1,773 insect species, 70 mammalian species, 500 phytoplankton species, 50 macro-crustacean species, and 2,000 angiosperms (Niger Delta Environment Survey, 2005). The continuous destruction of theft sites and burning of vessels poses a grave danger to this biodiversity hotspot, threatening crops, agricultural trees, and freshwater fish more abundant here than elsewhere in West Africa (Ogbeibu & Oribhabor, 2023). A program officer from a Bayelsa-based NGO stated:

This approach will worsen the already grave situation. We are still fighting gas flaring, battling oil spills, and dealing with artisanal refineries...And now the Federal Government's scorched-earth tactics...It's unfortunate environmental protection is not their immediate concern...once oil flows...the environment is their least worry...No wonder the ecosystem degrades daily (Interview with T. Preye, program officer of an NGO based in Yenagoa, Bayelsa).

This organized environmental destruction to stop oil theft reflects state disregard for the ecology (Floyd, 2008). A NOSDRA staff member noted:

> This approach is not good for the environment...we are already cleaning up many oil spill sites, a difficult and costly task...The military's current tactic has compounded the problem...The environment and the people will suffer (Interview with O. Essien, a staff of NOSDRA in Rivers State).

The tactic also affects mental health. Constant airstrikes force communities to live in fear. There are documented cases of airstrikes going wrong in Nigeria (Ogbozor, 2025; Okoli, Olaniyan & Ayegbusi, 2024). For instance, a businessman, Barine Friday, accused the Airforce of destroying his gin factory, mistaking it for an illegal refinery (Obeme-Ndukwe, 2025a). Dr. Fyneface Dumnamene Fyneface of YEAC-Nigeria also accused the Airforce of bombing a palm oil mill in Tai LGA, Rivers State, mistaking it for a refining site (Obeme-Ndukwe, 2025b). Constant surveillance, raids, and bombings create perpetual apprehension and fear, fostering resentment and antagonism towards the state (Ibeanu, 2000; Ikelegbe, 2005). According to Floyd (2008), any environmental threat endangers the well-being of its inhabitants. Thus, this kinetic approach is a threat to the mental well-being of communities routinely attacked. It also contaminates the air with hydrocarbons, increasing risks of cardiovascular and cancerous diseases (Ogbeibu & Oribhabor, 2023). Fires from these sites can burn for days. Enaholo and Adanu (2025) corroborated that gas flaring, oil spills, and other pollution increase respiratory and gastrointestinal problems in the region.

Furthermore, the approach threatens livelihoods. Most residents are farmers, hunters, fishermen, and palm wine tappers (Igben, 2021). Destroying sites and vehicles spills oil into rivers and creeks, harming fish and aquatic life that communities rely on for food and income (The Guardian, 2023).

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A community leader in Akwa Ibom State stated: Many of us are farmers and fishermen...but oil spill pollution has killed many fish...our catches are small and few...our farmlands are less fertile...Our harvests are meager compared to before. It's a sad situation. Even hunters are affected...Everyone is suffering from the burden of oil spills (Interview with E. Obong, a community leader in a village, Akwa Ibom State).

While not solely caused by the kinetic approach, it exacerbates the situation. As Alumona and Onwuanabile (2019) argued, environment and security are interlinked; any threat to how people earn a living from the environment is a security threat. Therefore, burning sites and vehicles undermines the environment and threatens food security, constituting a security threat (Floyd, 2008). While it has reduced oil theft, its environmental impact is undeniable and requires a rethink by the Nigerian state.

Concluding Remarks and the Way Forward

Annually, Nigeria loses billions of naira to rampant crude oil theft in the Niger Delta, carried out by sophisticated local and international criminal networks with alleged state and private security involvement. Drivers include poverty, unemployment, weak security, poor governance, and ungoverned spaces. Measures like amnesty, and using the NPF, NSCDC, military, and private security have had limited success. To curb the economic hemorrhage, the state adopted a predominantly kinetic approach, destroying theft sites and vehicles. While reducing theft, it poses serious dangers to humans, animals, and plants. The Niger Delta, known for rich biodiversity, suffers decades of degradation from oil exploration, production, and theft. The kinetic approach exacerbates these problems, undermining the environment, threatening well-being, and damaging farming, fishing, and hunting livelihoods, thereby increasing poverty and unemployment.

Therefore, the Nigerian state should promptly end this scorched-earth tactic due to its negative environmental impacts. Confiscated stolen crude should be documented, used as evidence for prosecution, and sold, with proceeds going to the government. Concerted efforts should enact and enforce laws against such tactics, swiftly prosecuting violators. Special speedy hearings for related cases should be encouraged. A special commission of inquiry should investigate past incidents and prevent future occurrences. Finally, a special commission should be established to conserve the region's rich biodiversity.

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