A Criminological Investigation into Oil Theft and Its Security Implications In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract— The object of this study is to investigate the menace of oil theft in the Niger Delta region, which is embedded in the Southern part of Nigeria described politically as the South-South geopolitical zone, and the security implications accompanying the menace. The objective is achieved by evaluating the continued incidence of oil theft even after years of agitation, amnesty, and sundry interventions to end oil theft and the resultant instability in the region. Adopting the qualitative doctrinal method of research, the findings show that 5-7% of the global market equivalent for crude is being stolen annually, which simply affirms already hypothesized suspicions that Nigeria suffers systemic corruption, a large shadowy network of oil theft, and security agencies' compromise or complicity in the thievery. Taking into account the history of instability, the security implications are rather grim, having the potential to return the region back into the dark age of violent agitations. It is therefore recommended that host communities and oil companies work together, as over-reliance on the Nigerian Government has proved abortive.

Keywords: oil theft; pipeline vandalism; systemic corruption; militancy; Niger Delta.

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) is a sub-arm of the United Nations created within the United Nations ecosystem to provide economic analysis and offer policy advice with the aim of promoting sustainable and equitable growth and development across the board. UNU-WIDER values global oil theft at $133 billion U.S. dollars per year, equivalent to 5-7% of the global market for crude oil and petroleum fuels (Romsom, 2022). Oil theft is a global issue because of the overly strategic role of crude oil to all the economies of the world. According to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC, 2019), oil remains the most traded commodity on the planet. Whether this could be regarded as an authentic fact remains to be seen since OPEC itself is an entity created to protect the oil hegemony of key oil-producing and exporting nations. The consistent global demand for the product, coupled with its easily transportable nature, means it can travel the whole distance outside the parameters of legally permitted channels of exchange, leaving and re-entering the controlled value chain seamlessly.

By definition, oil theft includes the stealing of crude oil from pipelines or flow stations as well as the unaccounted-for addition of excess crude oil to legitimate cargo (Asuni, 2009). The oil here is crude oil yet to be refined, usually exported from Nigeria to other developed countries for processing and importation back to Nigeria as Premium Motor Spirit and other substances derivable.

The criminological investigation into the phenomenon of oil theft in the Niger Delta and its security implications, not just for the region but for the entire nation, is actually a humongous task to embark on. However, the issue of oil theft is not a new or novel saga in Nigeria, and there have been prior investigations and studies into the subject matter of this research. Consequently, adopting the qualitative methodology of research, particularly the doctrinal method of evaluating intellectual submissions made in earlier literature vis-à-vis legislations and statistical data made available by official and unofficial channels, it is important to conduct a criminological investigation restricting our investigation to the Niger Delta region.

An impression needs to be corrected immediately regarding the myopic perception that the security travails of the Niger Delta region ended with the amnesty granted to the Niger Delta militants by the Nigerian Government over a decade ago, or began with the armed militancy in the region. Agitations over revenue sharing and repercussions from environmental degradation in the Niger Delta are as old as the discovery of crude oil itself in Nigeria.

Utilizing subheadings and subdivisions, the work is divided into five parts: part one evaluates or attempts to identify the criminal network of oil theft in Nigeria; part two focuses on the compromise of the Nigerian security agencies who are evidently complicit in the theft of oil in the region; part three considers the security implications of oil theft on the Niger Delta region; part four and part five sum up the findings, being the recommendation and conclusion sections respectively.

IDENTIFYING THE CRIMINAL NETWORK OF OIL THEFT IN NIGERIA

There are critical questions that trail the criminological investigation herein conducted. Is oil theft in the Niger Delta an individual issue, or is there a network of criminals responsible for the illegal trend? Is it simply an issue of sabotage or a problem rooted in resource-sharing misnomer? Can the criminal masterminds behind oil theft in the Niger Delta be traced? These and many more critical questions are to be answered if any meaningful progress is to be made in a criminological investigation. Interestingly, the subject of criminology plays an inevitable role in helping an avid reader understand the nature of criminal behaviour, with the end goal being to develop effective strategies to prevent and respond to the crime, in this current situation the crime being oil theft. Criminology itself is a multidisciplinary field that sets out to investigate the underlying causes and consequences of criminal behaviour. This being a criminological investigation, it is important to identify the possible underlying fault lines responsible for the oil theft criminal trend in the Niger Delta with the aim of ascertaining the security implications attached thereto.

It is estimated that about 10% of the daily oil production in Nigeria is lost to illegal activities, specifically theft, either through siphoning or direct diversion (School Software, 2022). The figure of 10% amounts to about 200,000 barrels of crude oil worth about $21 million dollars at $107 dollars per barrel per day (School Software, 2022). These figures are staggering, and such huge losses are experienced even till now, still unable to end the cycle, which points to one logical conclusion: a systemic or systematic network of theft through bunkering and other activities exists.

Chatham House (2013) opines that Nigeria offers a strong enabling environment which facilitates wide-scale theft of crude oil. In other words, the socio-political environment creates a dynamic, overcrowded political economy, creating a carpet of keen competition for looted resources from the oil sector, coupled with ridiculously poor government steeped in violent opportunism, leaving the door open to organized crime (Chatham House, 2013). Most of the studies and publications elucidating on oil theft in the Niger Delta circulated within the period of the Niger Delta militancy when the theft seemed at its highest; however, oil theft did not begin and end with the Niger Delta insurgency. The claim of Chatham House is not far-fetched; the culture of corruption in Nigeria is actually legendary and well-documented. The first observable underlying reason for oil theft comes from the loophole created by the Nigerian government system for selling oil, which attracts many shadowy middlemen, leading to the creation of a bewildering high-risk marketplace (Chatham House, 2013). Identifying the exact individuals who steal oil is elusive; however, a typical large-scale network consisting of area boys, facilitators, security personnel, foreign transport, and buyers, etc., constitutes the range of opportunists that have formed a network of criminals stealing oil in the Niger Delta region (Chatham House, 2013).

Iwuchukwu and Ezedinachi (2024) strongly opine that oil theft in the Niger Delta is a multi-billion dollar illicit industry that consists of political elites, international networks, local youths, and militant groups. Consequently, oil theft in the Niger Delta developed alongside political agitations that had been sparked by neglect of the welfare of the region by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Iwuchukwu & Ezedinachi, 2024). Nigeria runs a federal system of government with thirty-six (36) constituent states and the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Oil theft began as bunkering involving artisanal refining but now has metamorphosed into a multibillion-dollar transnational business enterprise, albeit an illicit one that operates under the radar.

Resource-sharing imbalance may be an obvious reason for theft of oil in the Niger Delta. The derivation principle in the sharing of oil revenue was originally intended to cater for the interest of the oil-producing states that already bear the brunt of environmental degradation for producing oil in their territory. There has been a dwindling of the derivation percentile from as high as 50% in 1960 to as low as 1.5% by the year 1992, ultimately weakening the fiscal autonomy of the Niger Delta and fuelling discontent among the citizens (Vanguard, 2026). This discontent led to the formation of several groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, which openly turned to oil theft and vandalism as one of its major modus operandi. Earlier than that, Ken Saro-Wiwa in the 90s led the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People using peaceful protest strategies, yet they were violently suppressed by the General Sani Abacha Government (Iwuchukwu & Ezedinachi, 2024). It is therefore no surprise that the latter pressure groups did not only resort to violence as a formidable strategy, but oil theft was adopted as a means to get what was purportedly their due through the backdoor.

In the 80s, oil theft accompanied small-scale artisanal refining of the stolen crude from illegal bunkering. Omozue (2021) connects artisanal refining to unemployed youths tapping pipelines to extract crude, distilling same into diesel and kerosene for consumption and utilization by the local indigenes. In other words, oil theft began as simply an artisanal hustle by unemployed youths without the vision of turning it into a big illicit industry. By 1990, illegal bunkering took an accelerated growth which can be attributed to the political instability at the time in Nigeria, which was still a military state, and then the loose regulatory capacity or framework. Presently, the scheme adopted by the criminals involved is to export stolen crude using marine vessels aided by cartels and international collaborators who usually settle the Nigerian security agencies or have an arrangement with key Nigerian elites in the sector (Akpomera, 2015).

What is a criminal network in the context of oil theft in the Niger Delta? Similar to legitimate organizations, criminal networks operate in complex environments and usually evolve after a while in response to internal and external factors (Manzi, 2025). Criminal networks are special cases of so-called covert networks (Diviak, 2020), with organizational structures undergirding their operations. According to Europol (2024), a key threat vector is seen in the use of criminal networks' strategy to infiltrate the legal business world as a vehicle to commit or conceal or disguise their crimes, especially laundering criminal profits. 86% of the most threatening criminal networks make use of Legal Business Structures (Europol, 2024). The EU Serious and Organized Crime Threat Assessment (Europol, 2021) puts the changing relationships between criminal actors into context in an organized crime landscape that is characterized by a networked environment where cooperation between criminals is fluid, systematic, and profit-driven.

Criminal networks often involve collaboration between groups and individuals. The organized groups of different organizational character and individuals are embedded within a particular network or external to that network. Balogun and Adesanya (2022) are of the opinion that the menace of oil theft has evolved into a syndicated enterprise reflecting underlying economic principles of formal business operations. The Vanguard (2026) reports that the recent exposure of Owaza Mami market in Abia State, specifically Ukwa West Local Government Area, as an oil bunkering and artisanal refining hub shows that oil theft networks are becoming more organized, more decentralized, and harder to find, moving slightly out of the main core Niger Delta states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, and Akwa Ibom State. It is not a coincidence that the menace of oil theft has not ended with the end of the militancy in the Niger Delta. Consequently, it is either there is complicity on the part of regulatory authorities and security agencies, or there is a network or multiple networks operating in a syndicated manner or at least with some level of interconnectedness to the operations. It took a joint intelligence operation by government security agencies and Pipeline Infrastructure Nigeria Limited to uncover the market's undercover role for stolen crude and illegally refined products (Vanguard, 2026). The report by Vanguard confirms the known fear that oil theft in the Niger Delta is no longer confined to the creeks or offshore pipelines; rather, criminal operations exist alongside legitimate economic life, making it complex to trace (Vanguard, 2026).

The Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Idi Abbas, strongly declared recently that masterminds behind crude oil theft in Nigeria often remain under the radar, hidden from security agencies, with the low-level operatives being the ones arrested at illegal refining sites with little knowledge of the larger criminal network (Usen, 2026). This confirms first the existence of larger criminal masterminds that form the shadow government behind the criminal network. The statement from the highest naval chief in the land should be taken seriously and accepted as insightful. The Naval Chief acknowledged the fact that the masterminds are the big masquerades not easily traceable, as the artisans at illegal refineries do not know them, frustrating attempts at successful investigations. The Group CEO of the Nigerian National Petroleum Company Limited, in a report in The Punch Newspaper, averred that crude oil theft across Africa, not just in the Niger Delta, is driven by specialized international and continental gangs exploiting security lapses in the countries producing oil on the continent (Sobowale, 2025). Put differently, there is an international network deliberately disguised to make the masterminds hidden from plain sight. Consequently, the masterminds may be individuals in government or persons in the petroleum sector often seeking to earn from legitimate and illegitimate means. The issue of identifying exactly who is behind the oil theft network would have been solved if the handy men primarily caught in the bunkering or vandalism of pipelines had clear direct contact with the masterminds, but this is not the case, leaving a lacuna to be filled by thorough investigation untainted by interference by moles in government. There is a clarion call for more investigation to identify the masterminds of the criminal network.

THE COMPROMISE OF NIGERIAN SECURITY AGENCIES

Nigeria on many forums has been presented as a corrupt nation, with bribery and corruption filtering into various sections of the economy, and the security infrastructure is not exempted. Imoisi and Okongwu (2021) suggest that considering the size of the theft of crude oil, it requires resources far exceeding the reach of local thieves because oil moved on barges and ocean vessels requires at least the approval, albeit tacitly, of some top army and navy officers, including former militant leaders paid to guard pipelines like overlords or warlords. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2009) had long ago opined that uniformed officers get their cut for providing information or for turning a blind eye to the theft or actively protecting the bunkers. An ill-powered security architecture will only be a victim to resources of bribery inspired by criminals involved in oil theft and oil bunkering. In Nigeria, all the security agencies are involved in the sector, but the Nigerian Civil Defence Force and the Nigerian Navy are at the forefront of, on the one hand, guarding national oil installations and infrastructure, while the Navy secures the maritime corridors. Ikelegbe (2005) long ago had noted that bunkerers pay protection fees to security agencies, and some of those security personnel either connive with the criminals or also provide security cover for the oil thieves to bring the stolen product to the high seas. The compromise of top brass of the Nigerian Navy, which is the frontline force in securing the maritime routes, is quite worrisome and should be a matter of serious urgency. Some ready instances of complicity of security agencies should be briefly mentioned.

In 2003, a 12,000-ton tanker of Russian origin carrying 11,000 tons of illegal crude oil was intercepted by the Nigerian Navy without any clear explanation. A Rear Admiral was demoted and fired as a result, with the former Chief of Naval Staff, Ganiyu Adeyeye, admitting that the Navy was involved in oil theft, specifically oil bunkering (Imoisi & Okongwu, 2021). The Navy is the closest to these crime scenes, and before bursts are reported or raids are made public, the naval officers are first responders, leaving them also open to criminal temptation. Eyiangho (2026) reports a raid by the Navy nabbing a suspect with 77,000 litres of stolen crude. The Nigerian Navy also in the news cycle reports thwarted attempts by oil thieves to revive illegal refining activities in Rivers State. The point there is that security agencies are exposed to temptation as first responders, and it becomes a matter of ethics, both personal and institutional, to overcome such temptation.

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF OIL THEFT ON THE NIGER DELTA

Nigeria has been dealing with oil theft for a long time now, with the height of it being during the military era when Niger Delta youths agitated for more balanced revenue sharing by taking up arms and also elevating the levels of oil theft in the Delta. As the 12th largest producer of petroleum, Nigeria has battled to keep control, introducing the Amnesty Programme in 2009 under the President Yar'Adua regime to quell the sorry security situation in the country (Rufus & Sinikiem, 2024). Despite the Amnesty programme, oil theft did not abate, making observers and scholars continue to study the phenomenon as it affects the entire security architecture of the Delta and the country as a whole.

In this part, one must consider the security implications of the continuing syndicated theft of oil in the Niger Delta. Although there are environmental implications also, as the theft of oil leads to pipeline vandalization and leakages which in turn affect the environment negatively, it is the security implication that is the challenge focused on here. The crucial question which is the crux of the matter is: why has oil theft continued to flourish despite attempts at ending the menace? What are the security implications for the continued thievery?

The first implication of oil theft in terms of security is that it muddles up the relationship between host communities and the oil companies, causing unrest and casualties on both sides of the spectrum. Crude oil theft in the Niger Delta at certain points in the developmental history of the region has forced major oil companies like Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon Mobil, Chevron, etc., to shut down their oil wells (Wizor & Wali, 2020). Distrust becomes rife between the oil companies and the host communities as the oil theft persists. Shell Petroleum Development Corporation, as a result of oil theft, had to declare force majeure on its operations from 2009 to 2014, year on year (Wizor & Wali, 2020). Oil theft is not possible without pipeline vandalism or breach of the transportation network for the oil. This in turn disrupts production, hampering the national economy also.

Oil theft leads to wide-scale escalation of hostilities between security agencies tasked with stopping the menace and the youths in the Delta, whether they are guilty or innocent, with many more scores becoming casualties. At the height of crude oil theft, the Nigerian Government set up the Joint Task Force, consisting of the Nigerian Army, Police, Navy, and Air Force, being the basic Joint Taskforce, later expanding to include the National Intelligence Agency, Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency, Nigerian Customs Service, etc., all saddled with the responsibility of putting an end to vandalism and crude oil theft (Deedam, 2025). There is no way there would be so much concentration of firepower without civilian casualties and further escalation of conflict in the Niger Delta. Boris (2016) conducted a study to establish the nexus between oil theft and insecurity in the Niger Delta. The finding reveals the nexus between crude oil theft and the continued proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the Niger Delta, opining that illegally purchased ammunition is made possible because of the proceeds of illegal bunkering. The truth of the challenge facing us is captured by Adamu and Audu (2025), who suggest that crude oil remains the linchpin of Nigeria's economic infrastructure, yet despite this, Nigeria continues to endure the debilitating consequence of widespread and institutionalized crude oil theft. It is rather shocking that despite over six decades of oil exploration and petroleum extraction, Nigeria has failed to adopt necessary technologies to operationalize transparent oil production and exportation.

Insecurity rises as oil theft rises because stolen crude often comes back to the region reinvested in weaponry, which criminals would use in squaring up against security agencies and rival groups, leading to a total militarization of the Niger Delta, which is one of the most negative security blowbacks caused by oil theft. The militarization of the region deepens insecurity, entrenching violence as a modus operandi for survival and political expression (Adamu & Audu, 2025). It is no surprise that ex-militant leaders are respected as warlords, some even striking legitimate security deals with the national government, and others being consulted like chiefs before meaningful developmental projects can take place in the region. The Niger Delta region is therefore a keg of gunpowder at all times because the environment has already been created to fuel conflict.

Oil theft encourages youth restiveness, making some young unemployed Niger Deltans genuinely believe that oil bunkering is a valid way of making money or feeding their family. There is a fearless drive to reap the oil wealth by hook or by crook, not minding the general negative blowback. What then must be done as a practical response to the thievery in the region?

RECOMMENDATIONS

a. **Deployment of high-end modern technology** to track oil transportation within the Delta region, especially transportation on the high seas within the territorial waters of Nigeria. First, the installations should be monitored with CCTV cameras. Second, barges of oil barrels should be tracked by portable devices such that if the barges are taken off course, they can be traced.

b. **Address the root causes of the cycle of oil theft:** Criminology suggests that there is a science to criminality; thus, the root causes of the cycle of oil theft must be addressed, and the question is how? Basic amenities must be provided for the locals to discourage them from taking laws into their own hands in a warped-up sense of justice or revenge. The social environment needs serious correction and re-assessment if oil theft must be curbed. Education should be made available for the next generation of young people in the Niger Delta to refocus their minds on nation-building rather than agitations and destabilization.

c. **Tackle general national insecurity:** General national insecurity breeds regional insecurity, promoting oil theft crimes; thus, the insecurity issue currently facing the nation needs to be tackled first. This needs both national and international collaboration, securing Nigeria's national borders, which have been quite porous, especially the Northern borders. Possibly it is time to consider building a border wall along the Northern Nigeria borderline.

d. **Establish a more sophisticated investigative framework:** It has been established that while the artisanal miners in illegal mining sites are easily caught, the masterminds are shadow individuals high up in society who seem elusive to the security operatives. Consequently, a more sophisticated investigative framework needs to be set up which reaches deep into the clandestine operations of these criminal networks. It is high time undercover agents are sent to infiltrate these oil theft networks just for the purpose of getting legitimate information that can lead to the arrest of the masterminds.

e. **Deal with the complicity of security agencies seriously:** The complicity of security agencies is an internal issue within these security agencies that must be dealt with seriously and in a heavy-handed manner to show the seriousness of the issue. Any officer implicated in oil theft should be court-martialed and then handed over to the Ministry of Justice for prosecution outside the parameters of military law.

f. **Cure the craze for oil shares:** The whole ecosystem of corruption in Nigeria features both politicians and top brass of the military involved in owning oil blocs. Apparently, everyone wants a piece of the national oil cake. The craze for oil shares needs to be cured with alternative resource development, whether in the extractive industry or in agriculture. This is a matter of national emergency.

CONCLUSION

The intention is not to sound like an alarmist; however, one must say the prospects of curbing oil theft in Nigeria are very bleak with the current government in power. Oil companies and host communities must now take it upon themselves to collaborate together to curb oil theft, either by getting private security outfits involved or to form clusters of local vigilantes who will be on the lookout for illegal refineries and theft hotspots, then report back to the companies or security apparatus set up in each community. A conspiracy of oil thieves can only truly be busted if the government of the day says enough is enough and it is ready to dismantle the leadership of the criminal network. The masterminds that form the high brass of society must be fished out and prosecuted if the Niger Delta is to ever know peace again.

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