
Nigeria: Shell sets forest ablaze

News of huge forest fires -as the ones that affected Indonesia and those that are spreading in Roraima in the Brazilian Amazon- are disseminated worldwide. Nevertheless, fires at a smaller scale have also terrible consequences for local communities. This is the case of the fire that has affected the forest of Aleibiri, a village of 6,000 inhabitants in the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The carelessness of the Shell contractor was the cause for this disaster. A providential rain -that Chief priest of Aleibiri Firstman Mgbeke called an intervention of their ancestres and gods- prevented the fire to expand.

The story of the Aleibiri forest fire actually started in March 1997, when a Shell's pipeline spewed crude oil into the surrounding wetlands, forests and waters of the community. Even if the company would at first not accept its responsibility, the fight of the native Ijaw forced Shell to contract Emmanique Services Co. to clean up the spill. But the operation was so carelessly performed that a fire started. It quickly spread helped by the unusually dry weather conditions that reigned.

Abuses of Shell date back to many years. In 1983 the communities of Ekeremor-Zion, Sekebulo, Obotobo 1 and Obotobo 2 took the Royal Dutch Shell as represented by its subsidiary to court for the environmental damages it produced in their lands. After about 14 years' delay judgement was delivered in favour of the communities, but Shell declared that they would not obey the High Court judgement and that they would appeal. At the same time Shell started using the apparatus of State security to threaten members of the community. There was a direct threat from Shell representatives to members of the communities, who were menaced to be given a 'Ogoni treatment'.

Source: Environmental Rights Action, 29/3/1998.