
Nigeria : “We thought it was oil but it was blood” (N.Bassey)

Nigeria holds the largest mangrove forest area in Africa, most of which is found in the Niger Delta, where 11,700 square kilometers of swamp forests host several unique plant and animal species.

However, that invaluable wealth is being jeopardized by oil business controlled by transnationals such as Shell, Agip, Mobil, Texaco and Chevron. Those companies have contributed not only to the destruction of the forests but to the exploitation and human rights violations of local communities, spreading conflicts and death (see WRM Bulletin N° 56).

One recent tragedy affected the Odioma community in Brass local government area of Rivers State. As always in the Niger Delta, the problem began with oil exploration and can be traced to 1998, when Shell discovered oil at Owukubu , a swampland adjoining the community. Ownership of the area had been a motive of local dispute between Odioma and Obioku communities, and had not been resolved when Shell started drilling operations in the area in January 2005.

The Odioma community was shocked and angered when Shell started the drilling of oil wells and a flow station designated as Toru-9 flow station. They went in huge number to the area demanding Shell to stop work until they were properly consulted and accorded due recognition as the owners of Owukubu . The youths of Odioma occupied the work site, and were only made to leave after the intervention of military personnel from a nearby community.

In no time, the communal crisis snowballed into unspeakable fatalities. A delegation of rival claimants to the compensation, reportedly going to Brass on a peace mission, was allegedly ambushed and attacked in the water-ways by leaders from Odioma. Twelve persons were said to have been killed.

In response, a Joint Task Force [JTF] of Nigerian Army and Navy officers invaded Odioma on January 19. Reports say they are acting not only as an “army of occupation” but also as soldiers of “operation wipe out.” As with previous operations of this type, a substantial number of the houses were set ablaze by the invading soldiers and over 1500 persons were killed, in addition to hundreds of others who were injured and about 3000 others who are held hostage by soldiers, according to Philemon Dickson, Odioma community spokesperson. The rest have been displaced, having fled into the mangrove forest and other towns.

“When the soldiers arrived at the community yesterday with their gunboats, our people thought they came for peace, and so no one raised any dust. Our chiefs gathered immediately at the palace of the Amanyanabo to await the soldiers to explain their mission, but the next thing that happened was shooting, shooting, shooting.... firing and firing. The soldiers were shooting at everyone, and started burning houses at the waterside”, said Dickson.

Community members that escaped reported that the soldiers are presently combing the forest bordering Odioma in search of persons who are taking refuge there, being further driven into the swamps and creeks, which in most cases are infested with mosquitoes and are rather inhabitable. More deaths are likely to happen not only from the bullets of the guns of soldiers but from starvation

and diseases.

Meanwhile, Shell, whose operation at Owukubu is the cause of the conflict in the area, has kept mute.

As Nnimmo Bassey's strong poem says: "Dried tear bags/ polluted streams/ things are real/ when found in dreams/ we see their Shells/ behind military shields/ evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs/ drilling our souls./ We thought it was oil/ but it was blood."

Article based on information from: "The Odioma Tragedy", This Day, <http://allafrica.com/stories/200503030172.html> ; "Briefings on the Odioma genocide 2", Ogele Club, <http://www.unitedijawstates.com/ogele.htm> ; "Again, genocide in the Niger Delta", <http://www.unitedijawstates.com/odioma.htm#odioma>