
Oil and violence in Nigeria

Oil exploitation is responsible for the destruction of mangroves, local community displacement and suffering, as well as environmental degradation of water sources and soil in Nigeria. This depredation is usually accompanied by brutal actions against local community members and activists, during which armed corps constitute the executive arm of the companies. The Niger Delta is an area where oil prospection and exploitation are especially active. Environmental destruction and human rights abuses in this region to the hands of Shell and Chevron have been repeatedly denounced (see WRM Bulletin 22).

Last April the Ekebiri communities of the Southern Ijau Local Government Area of Bayelsa were victims of the violence displayed by a group of soldiers, under the control and direction of Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC). Ekebiri is a clan of three communities -Ekibiri I, II, and Opuadoma- with 32 other satellite villages, with an estimated population of about 10,000 people. NAOC has been responsible for several human rights abuses in the Niger Delta. The company has even been accused by several of its host communities for instigating ethnic clashes amongst them as a way of weakening their resistance.

The events leading to the blood-bath started when the communities demanded from NAOC a compensation for the incessant spillages that have occurred in their territories, since 1969, the last being in 1997, and in which the company refused to pay. At the beginning of 1999 the company went into discussion with the communities but refused to pay the demanded sum. The discussions then broke down and the communities took steps on April 17 to enforce their demand by closing down the company's 2 manifolds in their communities. The following day NAOC took a military escort and reopened the shut manifolds, what was resisted by the villagers. The soldiers then opened fire into two boats, filled with unarmed youths and chiefs of Ekebiri I and II, who were on their way to a meeting with the Commissioner of Police of Bayelsa State. Eyewitnesses said that the shooting lasted for about 40 minutes and the soldiers shot the fleeing youths and chiefs until they landed on their community waterfront. Some were shot dead right on the community water bank while scrambling to run into their community. On hearing the gun shots, the entire villagers ran for their safety and deserted the village. As a result of this brutal action eight people were killed, two chiefs arrested and the boats seized.

The Nigerian Agip Oil Company Ltd. has produced crude oil in this region since 1969, but despite these two decades of oil exploration and generation of huge benefits for the company, the local population has remained poor. And their environment destroyed.

The Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organization (ND-HERO) is worried over the extent of impunity of Agip in dealing with oil producing communities. Agip is considered the worst company ever regarding environmental degradation and human rights abuses, seconded only by Elf Aquitaine.

ND-HERO demands government to take urgent steps to bring Agip and the soldiers involved in these atrocities to justice and for Agip to abandon the use of the military in suppressing communities, and

the instigation of ethnic struggles amongst the Niger Delta communities.

Those interested in supporting this local struggle can send faxes of protest demanding for justice to the Ekebiri community to:

General Abdulsalami Abubakar, Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Nigeria Armed Forces, The Managing Director, Nigeria Agip Oil Company.

Source: Late Friday News, 35th edition, April 1999 (from a report by Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organization ND-HERO dated April 22, 1999)