

Nigeria: Oil, poverty and violence

"It is like paradise and hell. They have everything. We have nothing... If we protest, they send soldiers. They sign agreements with us and then ignore us. We have graduates going hungry, without jobs. And they bring people from Lagos to work here." Eghare W.O. Ojhogar, chief of the Ugborodo community in Delta State

On 4 February 2005, soldiers fired on protesters at Chevron's Escravos oil terminal on the coast of the western Niger Delta killing one man and injuring at least 30 others. Chevron Nigeria, the subsidiary that operates the terminal, said that the protesters were armed with guns, although none appeared to have been seized by the security forces or captured on video recordings of the incident.

The protestors were from Ugborodo, an Itsekiri community located within sight of the oil terminal. According to the community, the protest was over the company's failure to fulfil an agreement to provide jobs and development projects to the community. The community has electricity for two hours a day from a generator installed at the villagers' cost. Chevron Nigeria provides water for three hours at a time, twice a day. Large numbers of youth from the community are unemployed. They complain that they face discrimination in hiring, a charge the company denies.

No thorough or independent inquiry into the incident has been carried out either by the government or by Chevron Nigeria. The company said it could not control the actions of the security forces in any way, and expressed no intention of taking immediate steps to avoid a recurrence.

Just two weeks later, at least 17 people were reported to have been killed and two women raped when soldiers raided the Ijaw community of Odioma, Bayelsa State. The attack was ostensibly to arrest members of an armed vigilante group suspected of killing four local councillors and eight others earlier that month. Members of this armed vigilante group were reported to have been recruited by a sub-contractor of Shell's subsidiary in Nigeria. The suspects were not captured but, over a period of a few days, around 80 per cent of the homes in Odioma were destroyed. Two of those killed, Balasanyun Omieh, a woman said to be 105 years old, and two-year-old Inikio Omieye, burned to death. Three people were reportedly shot dead. Many inhabitants fled the violence and did not return.

A Judicial Commission of Inquiry appointed by the State Governor of Bayelsa State to investigate the incidents submitted a report in June 2005 that has not yet been made public. No action is known to have been taken to determine the number or identity of those killed; to order the exhumation of graves; to investigate the responsibility of the security forces for deaths, injuries or the destruction of homes; or to bring to justice those suspected of human rights violations.

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria has seen escalating conflict and violence in the last two decades. Oil revenues account for over 98 per cent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. However, little of this wealth is distributed within the Niger Delta, or to the Nigerian people as a whole. Economic and social rights, such as the right to health and the right to an adequate standard of living, remain unfulfilled for many Nigerians.

Thousands died in mass killings when conflict erupted over control of oil in the late 1990s and again in 2003 and 2004. Growing numbers of human rights activists within the Niger Delta are holding the oil companies responsible for human rights violations by the Nigerian security forces – both those connected to oil operations and those committed to protect oil interests.

BACKGROUND:

The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists –Baribor Bera, Saturday Doobee, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbokoo, Barinem Kiobel, John Kpuinen, Paul Levura and Felix Nuate – on 10 November 1995 raised a storm of outrage across the world. Their deaths highlighted the suffering of the Ogoni people, one of many marginalized ethnic groups living in the oil-rich delta of the Niger river.

Ken Saro-Wiwa had fought for an end to the environmental damage that was turning his homeland into what he described as a “wasteland”, endangering the people’s health and livelihoods. Ten years later oil spills still blacken the land and pollute the waterways. Hundreds of gas flares burn day and night, filling the sky with soot and fumes. The diverse communities living among the oil flares continue to live in extreme poverty – 70 per cent have to subsist on less than US\$1 a day.

The military government which executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight companions was replaced in 1999 by a civilian government. Yet government security forces are still killing people and razing communities with impunity. Human rights defenders and journalists, including foreign television crews, have been harassed, detained and sometimes beaten for investigating oil spills or security forces violations. The federal government has rejected calls for independent and impartial inquiries into abuses by these forces, which operate under its direct control.

In every region of the world, Indigenous peoples face deeply entrenched racism and discriminatory laws and policies. Denied adequate protection of their right to live on and use the lands and territories vital to their cultural identity and their daily survival, Indigenous communities are often driven into extreme poverty and ill-health. Amnesty International is working alongside Indigenous peoples’ movements from around the globe to help advance effective international human rights standards to address their specific needs and circumstances. This includes calling for the immediate adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when it comes before the General Assembly this year

TAKE ACTION

Demand accountability for human rights violations in the Niger Delta. Write to the Nigerian Federal government urging it to:

- conduct thorough and independent inquiries into allegations that the security forces killed, injured or attacked civilians or damaged their property in incidents on 4 February 2005 at Escravos terminal and on 19 February 2005 in Odioma; make public the findings of these inquiries and of the Bayelsa State inquiry into the Odioma case; and bring those responsible for human rights violations to justice.
- Take immediate measures to fully uphold the rights of the affected communities as recognized in international human rights laws and standards, including the right of communities affected by oil exploitation to freely grant or withhold their consent for such operations.

Write to:

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Salutation: Your Excellency President Obasanjo