

Death toll from Nigerian pipeline explosion may reach 1,000

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Local officials say the death toll from the Nigerian oil pipeline explosion October 17 may reach as high as 1,000. There are 700 men, women and children known dead. Some 400 bodies, burnt beyond recognition, have already been buried in mass graves near the Niger Delta town of Warri.

A United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) spokesman said about half of the 300 people in hospitals have second and third degree burns and could die unless given skin grafts or treated by specialists. Many more victims are expected to die because family members took them out of hospitals and clinics out of fear that they would be arrested by the military. A nurse, reporting on those who fled, said, 'Many of those who signed off have since died; so they simply went home to die.'

Within days of the explosion, military ruler General Abdulsalami Abubakar traveled to the scene and declared that the pipeline explosion had been caused by 'sabotage' and the government would find those responsible. He also said relatives of the victims would not be compensated. After international criticism the government said it would not make any arrests. However, the powerful state oil company, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), is demanding arrests and prosecution of 'anyone implicated in the vandalization of the oil pipeline.'

BBC News reported that although the government and foreign oil companies in the area knew about the disaster soon after it happened, the matter was not made public. As a result, medical assistance was delayed, and only arrived after many had already died. Overtaxed hospitals and clinics also turned away many victims.

For the people of Jesse, mostly poor cassava farmers and small traders, the ruptured pipeline, which had been spewing gasoline for three days, offered an opportunity

for desperately needed income. As many as 2,000 people flocked to the scene despite the dangers. 'I heard people rushing to the scene where the fuel was leaking and everybody was saying 'God has brought wealth to Jesse,' and so I joined,' said Richard James, who was hospitalized with severe burns. 'At the scene, I heard a deafening explosion...and before I knew what was happening, I was already on fire.'

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate who returned to the country after years in exile, commented, 'The victims from the fire died because the combination of poverty and economic mismanagement in the country made them desperate enough to do so. Their deaths were a reflection of the general social malaise.'

It is still unclear whether the pipeline ruptured because of vandalism or because of an equipment failure. The corruption and mismanagement of the state-owned petroleum company, along with the indifference of the multinational oil companies that reap huge profits in the impoverished Niger Delta region, has led to hundreds of oil spills and pipeline ruptures. A week after the disaster another pipeline ruptured north of Jesse. The NNPC immediately declared that it was the result of sabotage.

In the aftermath of the tragedy the anger of area residents and youth erupted in violence. Six people died as a result of rioting in the town of Warri as armed young people burned down houses and attacked oil company employees. Intertribal conflict also erupted between two ethnic minorities in the region--the Ijaw, mainly poor fishermen, and the Itshekiri, mostly subsistence farmers.

To a great extent these intertribal conflicts have been encouraged by the military and the oil companies. Tensions have been simmering for two years over the

location of government buildings and jobs, and how scarce resources in the area are deployed. Earlier this month the Ijaws seized a Shell Oil installation and prevented the production of 400,000 barrels of oil a day--nearly a quarter of Nigeria's daily oil production. At the center of protests is the demand that the government and oil companies invest more in the community and provide them with basic and vitally needed social services.

While Shell Oil has generated \$30 billion in profits from exploiting the region's oil resources and decimating its ecosystem--destroying farmland, fisheries and mangroves--Niger Delta residents subsist on less than \$280.00 per year. Their villages lack clean water, decent roads and other elemental needs.

Kofi Egbo, a spokesman from the Southern Minorities Front of Nigeria, told the WSWs, 'The ethnic conflicts between the Ijaws and the Itshekir are strange. These people have lived together in peace for hundreds of years. The root cause of the conflict was the government's decision to relocate certain seats of local government, causing resentment. Now this conflict is being used as a excuse for a military crackdown.

'When the Ogoni people (another ethnic minority in the delta) protested against Shell and the military in the early 1990s, the government provoked similar tribal conflicts. Until a few weeks ago, the military had occupied the Ogoni area.

'The pipeline is run by the state-owned Pipelines and Products Marketing Company. It is part of a joint venture with Mobil, Shell, Texaco, Elf and an Italian oil company. We call Shell the underground government of Nigeria. Shell threatens to pull production out of the country to get the government to do its bidding. The 1995 hanging of Nigerian author, Ken Saro-Wiwa, the leader of the Ogoni protest movement, was initiated by Shell.

'It the mid-1980s General Abacha agreed that as long as some of the oil profits went to the military government, he would make sure the interests of Shell were looked after. He implemented laws making it impossible to sue Shell and hold it accountable. They built this pipeline, which carries gasoline for 380 miles through villages and over agricultural land. They made it above ground because it was cheaper than burying it. The oil companies and the government bred the environment for this kind of disaster to happen.'

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