

# Nigerian government clamps down on gas protesters

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The first shipment of gas from the recently built \$3.8 billion Nigerian Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) plant has been delayed due to social and political unrest in the delta region.

The shipment to France, planned for October 1, Nigeria's Independence Day, was suspended after protesters attacked the Bonny Island plant. The LNG Lagos freight ship had been scheduled to arrive at Bonny on September 24, but the previous day youth took over the town in protest at the lack of jobs provided to local people by NLNG and the company's disregard for the environment. The town was brought to a standstill for three days.

Prior to the protest, a meeting of Bonny's local administration body had presented 18 demands to NLNG. These included transferring NLNG headquarters from Lagos to Bonny, providing management positions for local people, and compensation for losses in fishing and agriculture caused by the company's activities. The body had earlier called on NLNG to carry out an environmental impact assessment and to provide electricity and clean drinking water for the area.

To retake control of the situation in the town, River States area Governor Dr. Peter Odili, called a meeting of all the local security agencies and put them on a 24-hour alert. Previous protests in the area have been violently suppressed. In an effort to diffuse the protests, Odili gave two 500KVA generating plants to Bonny and promised that a drinking water supply would be forthcoming.

President Olusegun Obasanjo paid a one-day visit to Bonny the day after arriving back in Nigeria from the United Nations General Assembly session. Peace talks involving senior government officials, company representatives and leaders from the Bonny community

were then held in Abuja. Initially NLNG had declared that they were unable to send their first gas shipment, threatening their European contract, but after Obasanjo's intervention they announced that full production would be maintained.

There are huge reserves of natural gas in Nigeria and some estimate the earnings from their sale could exceed oil sales revenues. NLNG was set up to exploit these reserves. The government owns 49 percent of the company, with the remainder shared between Shell, Elf and Agip. Nigeria hopes to gain a large portion of the global Liquefied Natural Gas market, initially in Europe.

As well as expanding gas production, Obasanjo has promised his Western backers that his new civilian administration will boost oil production (from which it currently earns more than 90 percent of its export revenues) from 2 million barrels a day to 3 million barrels over the next four years. By cutting public spending and using the increased oil and gas revenue, Obasanjo has committed his government to slashing the projected 1999 budget deficit from \$2.7 billion to \$260 million.

In his address to the United Nations in September, Obasanjo pledged that he would privatise Nigeria's four oil refineries as well as inviting companies to build further refineries. He also pledged to pursue a plan to build an underwater gas pipeline, which would take natural gas to other West African states. He dismissed opposition to the pipeline from environmental groups, saying that it was better to export the gas rather than flare it (burn it off).

Given these pledges, the government's priority has been to control ongoing unrest and ethnic conflicts in the delta area. The recent protests at Bonny are only the latest in sporadic conflicts between the local population

and the oil companies, who are defended by the armed forces. World attention was focussed on the region in 1996, when Ken Saro-Wiwa and leaders of the Ogoni people were hanged by the military regime. Since that time nothing has been done to alleviate the social devastation facing all the delta peoples.

A September 23 report in the South African *Mail and Guardian* detailed how the oil companies have demanded prompt action by the government to deal with the increasingly violent opposition. It quoted a senior Shell executive as saying that the situation was tense and that the company is "firefighting in all directions". He added, "What is happening is alarming ...social disintegration is taking place."

During the last year over 200 people have been killed in clashes with state forces in oil-related riots. Shell Oil report that in the last six months it has suffered 50 kidnappings of its workers and had 150 of its installations occupied. These occupations carried out by youth have demanded aid, compensation for the pollution and jobs.

The article continued: "Travelling through the delta is a depressing and eerie experience: in devastated communities with next to no work and no access to electricity or hospitals the tension is palpable. Oil spills, due to either sabotage or neglect, are being reported at least twice a week and giant flares light the night sky as oil company helicopters fly overhead. In Yenagoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, the army patrols the streets as gangs of youths congregate."

The Ijaw are the majority ethnic group in the area, with 11 million people. Following the example of the Ogoni, Ijaw youth have been campaigning for a share in wealth and resources produced from oil. Similar calls have been taken up by other minority ethnic groups belonging to the Itsekari, Ogba, Ikwerre, Urhobo and Adoni.

Their demands are taking on a separatist character, threatening the break-up of the Nigerian state. The Nigerian government is said to have placed an army brigade on red alert. Oil company security staff are to work with 2,500 police to take on the opposition.

Security forces were reported to have killed 50 people from the Egbesu group based in Yenagoa recently. Isaac Osuoka of the local youth council stated, "It was genocide.... Nigerian soldiers are stripping, torturing and harassing innocent people. They have been

rounding up people in the streets for identification. Those identified as Ijaw were then driven away in military trucks for summary execution."

Human Rights Watch said that the oil companies are colluding in the abuses. Four people died in January of this year when the military used Chevron-owned helicopters to end a peaceful oil facility occupation.

The *Mail and Guardian* article concluded with a warning from Anyakwee Nsirimovu of the Institute of Human Rights: "People eat, breathe and think poverty. There is now a great yearning for self-determination across the delta. People are not ready to lose the momentum. They are willing to the point of dying to continue their struggle. What happens here will determine whether Nigeria continues to exist or not."

*See Also:*

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