

More than 250 feared dead in Nigerian pipeline explosion

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A damaged oil pipeline gushing fuel exploded in southern Nigeria early Monday morning, killing more than 250 people. Many of the dead were schoolchildren, whose uniforms could be discerned on some of their charred remains.

The explosion took place near the village of Adeje with a population of 5,000, not far from the port city of Warri in the oil-rich Niger Delta. Despite its proximity to a city, it took 24 hours for fire crews to arrive at the scene. Fire fighters had to extinguish a further smaller blaze at the same spot on Wednesday.

Such is the frequency of fire outbreaks on pipelines in the Warri area that fire fighters have practically given up any effort to quell them. The usual practice is to cut off the flow of oil in the pipes and let the flames burn out.

Sometimes the pipelines are damaged by militant activists trying to force the government and oil companies to compensate local communities for land use and pollution. More often, villagers break open the pipeline and collect the fuel either to sell on the roadside or to power cheap generators and other motors. Villagers said the Warri pipeline had been punctured for this purpose by street vendors on Sunday night.

By Monday local people had also begun collecting fuel from the damaged pipeline. Many of the dead were still clutching fuel buckets they had been using. Some had attempted to outrun the flames from the explosion but had been unable to get away, as the fire destroyed fields and buildings in a 2 kilometre radius. Mass graves have been dug to bury the dead.

Villagers said many of those who had survived the inferno had gone into hiding in order to avoid being prosecuted for theft. "When we heard the explosion and saw the raging fire we considered it as normal because

the breaking of pipelines and siphoning of fuel is happening all the time," said Adeje resident Monday Ochuko. "But when people started screaming we rushed there and saw the bodies," he said, adding that he had taken his family to Warri for fear of a police roundup of suspected fuel thieves.

Statements by Nigerian government officials emphasised how widespread the fuel theft has become. "The tanker drivers puncture the pipeline and pump gasoline into their vehicles and then drive off, leaving fuel gushing out. Villagers then come in with their buckets and jerry cans," one said.

It is a testimony both to the scale of poverty in Nigeria and to how little the people of the region benefit from its rich natural resources that so many risk their lives regularly to gain fuel. For many there is little other means of making a living. The practice has triggered numerous explosions in the past. In 1998, 1,000 people died in an explosion at the nearby village of Jesse.

In addition, whilst Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer, its inhabitants suffer from shortages of petroleum products. The four refineries in Nigeria have been run down under successive administrations and nearly all of the oil is now exported and refined elsewhere. The Warri pipeline owned by state-run Nigerian National Petroleum Corp (NNPC) was originally built to carry crude oil to a refinery in the northern town of Kaduna. It had to be modified later to transport refined products, following a prolonged shutdown of the refinery for repairs. The Kaduna refinery once had a throughput of 110,000 barrels per day.

Doyin Okupe, a spokesman for President Olusegun Obasanjo, spoke contemptuously after the explosion, which he described as an "avoidable tragedy". Pipeline

vandalism “is driven by poverty and greed,” Okupe said adding, “they know the risks.” Nigeria has a network of more than 3,125 miles of pipelines criss-crossing the oil-producing country. Obasanjo, who came to office in May 1999, has set up a special task force of soldiers and police backed by helicopters to protect the pipelines.



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