

Nigerian regime loses legal dispute over oil

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Nigeria has lost its eight-year legal battle with neighbouring Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula, an area rich in offshore oil and gas deposits. The International Court of Justice at The Hague ruled against Nigeria's claim over the land that dates back to a 1913 deal between the colonial powers, Britain and Germany, giving the peninsula to Cameroon.

According to the Nigerian newspaper *This Day*, Cameroon will gain reserves of at least 100 million barrels of oil and four trillion cubic feet of gas. Although this only represents about 0.3 percent and 2 percent respectively of Nigeria's total reserves, in a country entirely dependent on oil wealth it is seen as a serious loss of face by the military elite.

The loss of reserves is coupled with a potentially serious military dispute over access to the Atlantic Ocean. Major oil corporations including ExxonMobil, Shell and TotalFinaElf are concerned about the settlement, having oil fields in the disputed region or terminals where ships will have to pass through Cameroon waters that are at present patrolled by the Nigerian navy. *This Day* reported the Nigerian counsel's submission to the International Court: "Can Nigeria seriously contemplate having a major part of her fleet passing down a narrow stretch of water on a regular basis under the guns of Cameroon?" Following the court decision Nigeria dispatched warships carrying troops and heavy artillery to the Nigerian side of the disputed region.

Further conflict in the area is also possible with the tiny island country of Sao Tomé and Príncipe, which has apparently repudiated its agreement with Nigeria over the joint exploitation of waters in the Gulf of Guinea holding an estimated four billion barrels of oil.

The ratcheting up of oil disputes follows the increasing interest of the United States in West African oil as an alternative source of supply as it prepares for war in the Middle East. Nigeria is under pressure from the oil corporations and the Bush administration to accept the legal ruling and avoid a move to military conflict that could easily bring in France supporting its former colony Cameroon. *This Day* quote a Nigerian official saying, "in the event of a war, France will most likely back Cameroon, Nigeria may take it out on [French-owned] Elf Petroleum Nigeria Limited." With war breaking out in Côte d'Ivoire and conflict continuing in Liberia, the western powers are concerned about the stability of the entire region.

The Hague judgement can only add to the acute problems of

President Olusegun Obasanjo, who faces elections in April 2003 after four years of increasingly unstable civilian rule. This month it was announced that two more people—a couple convicted of committing adultery—face being sentenced to death by stoning under Sharia law that is being imposed in the northern predominantly Muslim states. There are now at least five death-by-stoning cases, although none of the accused has yet been executed. The implementation of this barbaric punishment by the rulers of the northern states is not only designed to brutally suppress the local population, but also to whip up religious and ethnic conflict.

Behind the move to Sharia are such former military rulers of Nigeria as Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Abduksalami Abubakar. The northern ruling elite has financed extreme Islamic organisations and gangs of youths are being mobilised against Christian minorities in the region. So far 12 states have adopted Sharia and there have been ethnic clashes in which at least 6,000 people have been killed. Obasanjo has declared Sharia to be against the Nigerian constitution, but has failed to take any action against it.

Obasanjo had some credibility when he came to power—although a former military leader, he was imprisoned under the regime of General Abacha—but has been shown to be unwilling to oppose the northern generals. Rather, he has relied upon the army maintaining order in ethnic conflicts by heavy-handed suppression and bringing in military rule in several of Nigeria's 36 states. He backed the army when they massacred several hundred civilians from the ethnic Tiv grouping in the central region of Nigeria last year after disputes over land, and the killing by the army of at least 400 civilians in the town of Odi in the Delta region, November 1999, to suppress local opposition to the oil corporations.

It is becoming ever more difficult to hold together Nigeria's numerous regional elite's. Under the decades of military rule preceding Obasanjo's election in 1999, religious and ethnic conflict was suppressed, especially following the attempt of the mainly Igbo south eastern region to form the breakaway state of Biafra in the 1966-70 civil war. During the Cold War period the western powers were prepared to allow the generals to siphon off some of the oil wealth of Nigeria to maintain their corrupt rule. As Obasanjo has attempted to impose IMF privatisation measures, cutting back the federal funding to the regions, there have been growing conflicts between the local elites.

Evidence of the worsening divisions between ruling factions is provided by the numerous political assassinations taking place, some of them of high-ranking figures. In December 2001 Justice Minister Bola Ige was assassinated—almost certainly because of his opposition to the northern military domination of Nigeria. In September, Isyaku Mohammed, deputy chairman of a new northern-based party, the United Nigeria People's Party, was assassinated.

Another recent political assassination was Nigerian Bar Association chairman for the state of Anambra Barnabas Igwe and his wife on September 1, 2002. Igwe had severely criticised the state government and its governor Chinwoke Mbadinuju, accusing them of filching money that should have been used to pay local government workers. Many suspect the state government of being behind the killings.

Discontent with Obasanjo among Nigeria's political elite has surfaced with an attempt to impeach him that began two months ago. A group of MPs, including some from Obasanjo's own ruling People's Democratic Party and influential figures such as Farouk Lawan, chairman of the House Information Committee, have called on Obasanjo to resign or face impeachment. The charges against Obasanjo include the use of the army on several occasions against civilians.

However, the main issue is resentment over distribution of government finances. It is claimed that Obasanjo has withheld money from parliament, oil revenues are not properly accounted for, and that there has been a failure to fight widespread corruption. The impeachment process, which is likely to drag on for months and unlikely to force Obasanjo out of office, is designed to politically damage him ahead of next year's elections. Obasanjo has now called in former military ruler General Gowon and former President Shagari to assist him in resolving the standoff with the National Assembly.

There is widespread public anger against the Obasanjo regime, as illusions that civilian rule would bring prosperity and greater democracy have been shattered. Despite producing over two million barrels of oil per day, Nigeria's GDP per capita was \$854 in 1999, a figure in the lowest third of the sub-Saharan countries, and falling as population growth outstrips growth in GDP. According to the World Bank, 44 percent of Nigerians live in absolute poverty, defined as a daily income of \$1 per day or less. Income has declined on average by 1.5 percent a year for the last 25 years. At the same time, the increases in fuel prices imposed by the regime—as demanded by the International Monetary Fund—have driven up the cost of living. According to World Health Organisation figures of May 2000, life expectancy in Nigeria is only 38.3 years. Only 61 percent of the urban population has access to sanitation and 63 percent has access to water.

The recent voter registration ended in chaos on September 22. Many registration stations were left without forms and long queues of people were turned away unregistered. An estimated 60 million Nigerians were expected to register, and the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) said it had distributed 70 million registration forms. In the event, many of the forms went missing. This is widely believed to be due to corrupt politicians buying the forms, with the intention of stuffing ballot boxes during the next year's elections. As a result, up to 40 percent of the population could be left without a vote. Besides the lack of sufficient registration forms, other problems included registration stations that moved without notice or closed early, stations that claimed to be signing up voters more quickly than was humanly possible, while little or no registration at all was taking place in some densely populated areas.

The scale and openness of this vote rigging suggests that next year's elections will be even more fraudulent than those of 1999. At that time the western powers were prepared to overlook widespread ballot rigging and the fact that the previous military regime limited which parties and candidates were allowed to stand. It seems unlikely that the next election will be exposed as a fraud by the international observers and the media, even though the scale of corruption is already much greater than that in Zimbabwe.

Obasanjo has consistently promoted the interests of the US and western oil companies. The US has been training the Nigerian military as a professional army, as well as providing it with funds, to move into trouble spots throughout the region. Obasanjo's remit has been to open Nigeria up to untrammelled exploitation, push up the price of oil and petrol inside Nigeria towards world market rates while exceeding OPEC quotas and bringing down global prices, privatise the state sector, and drive down the proportion of wealth going to the working class and rural poor. He has not been able to push ahead with privatisation as far as the western powers would have liked because of resistance from regional powerbrokers and opposition from the mass of the population. But for the time being, despite the instability and centrifugal forces inside Nigeria, Obasanjo's rule is seen by the US as the best means of maintaining a semblance of regional stability and thus western interests in West Africa as a whole.



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