

Nigerian government launches assault on civilians in Delta region

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The Nigerian armed forces have launched a brutal assault on civilians in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. "Operation Flush Out 3" is an attempt to subdue the region in the interests of the oil companies that operate there. Ordered to use maximum force, the combined naval, air and army operation has carried out air raids on heavily populated civilian areas.

Hundreds of troops have been moved in to the Delta region. Though martial law has not been officially declared, the military has taken over security duties from the police. Large numbers of federal troops have been stationed at the Bonny export terminal, which exports about a million barrels of oil a day.

Nigeria is the world's seventh-largest oil producer and the fifth-largest source of oil for the United States. All this oil comes from the Delta region or the offshore fields in the Gulf of Guinea. As the insurgents in Iraq have increased their attacks on oil production, so the importance of Nigerian oil has increased.

Former military ruler Olusegun Obasanjo, who became the elected president in 1999, is a close ally of the US, which trains and finances his army. The US recently sold Nigeria four gunboats for use in the Delta and to police the offshore oil facilities.

Reliable figures for the number of casualties are not available because reporters have not been able to go into the area except on military gunboats. Amnesty International reports that 500 civilians were killed in Port Harcourt. Tens of thousands of people have fled from surrounding villages to take refuge in Port Harcourt. They are said to be living in churches and under bridges without clean water or adequate food.

The total deaths may be much higher. At a press conference in the Delta city of Port Harcourt, president of the Ijaw National Council Professor Kimse Okoko claimed that chemical weapons had been used in some

of the air raids. He reported that in the wake of the air strikes on fishing villages, people found that their bodies had large pimples and boils.

The ostensible purpose of Operation Flush Out 3 is to suppress warring ethnic militias and so-called cult groups, but it is clear from the reports that have filtered out that it is the civilian population that is targeted. Residents are being subjected to a campaign of terror comparable to that visited on the civilian population of Fallujah in Iraq.

Oronto Douglas, a lawyer in Port Harcourt, said that what was once a garden city had been turned into a garrison city. Shell, one of the main companies operating in the region, is in the process of moving its headquarters to Port Harcourt, and it is thought that imposition of de facto military rule in the city is connected to this decision.

Shell has evacuated some of its staff from two oil fields, but production has so far continued. Last year, an insurrection by local militias cut production by 40 percent, but this time the initiative seems to be in the hands of the government and the oil companies.

In public, the oil companies are claiming that the military operations are entirely the concern of the government and have nothing to do with them. This is disingenuous. Shell was closely connected with the previous military regime that executed Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had campaigned against the activities of the company in the Delta. The company has admitted importing guns into the country to arm the Nigerian police.

An ongoing court case in France has revealed something of the dirty relationship that exists between the oil companies and the Nigerian government. Halliburton, the US oil services company whose former CEO Dick Cheney is now vice president of the US, has

been accused of setting up a \$180 million slush fund in connection with contracts for a new gas export plant.

Also involved in the scandal is Ely Calil, the Lebanese-born businessman who has been linked to the recent coup attempt in Equatorial Guinea, another West African country with large oil reserves.

Nigeriagate, as it has been dubbed, threatens to upset relations between Washington and Abuja. The military operations in the Delta are in some measure an attempt on the part of Obsanjo to restore US confidence in his abilities.

The government and the oil companies are themselves largely responsible for provoking the violence in the Delta region. Rivalries have been whipped up between different ethnic groups as they have competed for access to jobs and contracts with the oil companies. They have been played off against one another in their attempts to get compensation for pollution and other environmental damage.

At Ogulagha, near Warri, houses were washed into the sea after a nearby flow station shifted wave action and increased the level of erosion. Elsewhere, oil leaks have made land uncultivable. Oil has seeped into the water table, and air pollution is a serious problem. Fishing grounds and mangrove swamps have been destroyed.

All these problems are added to the consistent fall in living standards and the collapse of the social infrastructure that have hit the whole of Nigeria. In 1960, 15 percent of Nigeria's population was living in poverty; by 1980, it was 28 percent; by 1985, it was 46 percent; and in 1996, it hit 66 percent. By 2003, 80 percent of Nigeria's population was living on less than a dollar a day. These levels of poverty are in an oil-rich country.

Nigeria's oil wealth has been siphoned off by its rulers, military and civilian, and handed over to western banks in the form of debt repayments. Its population has not seen the benefit of any of this money.

One of the effects in the Delta has been the emergence of armed gangs that often finance their activities by siphoning oil from pipelines. Members of the government are said to be involved in this racket. Last year, 1,000 people were killed at Jesse when a pipeline blew up after being tapped in this way.

Though the government is now claiming to be cracking down on their activities, only last year it was

reported to be paying them to intimidate its political opponents. Alhari Asari Dokubo and Ateke Tom, two of the major warlords in the area, are both said to have been in the government's pay during the elections.

On September 29, Asari flew to Lagos and claims to have made a peace deal with the government. This may assist him in his internecine struggle with other groups, but will do nothing to improve the conditions of the local population or lift the military clampdown.

Nigeria is becoming increasingly important as a source of oil, not only because of the conflict in the Middle East, but because vast oil reserves have been found offshore. Shell's Bonga field reportedly holds 1.2 million barrels. ExxonMobil has the 400-million Yoho field. Chevron Texaco is developing the Agbami field. The shift to offshore production calls for a political shakeup onshore. The big oil companies are no longer willing to tolerate a situation in which they have to make even limited payments to Delta communities hit by their operations. The West African oil field is a vital strategic concern for the US, and local people are paying a heavy price for it.



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