

More than 200 dead in Lagos suburb

Pipeline explosion highlights legacy of imperialism in Nigeria

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18 May 2006

The tragic death of more than 200 people in a pipeline explosion in a suburb of Lagos, Nigeria, is an expression of the desperate poverty facing the vast majority of the population in this country. Despite the huge risk involved, tapping holes into fuel lines—in this case carrying gasoline from the port to inland depots—and siphoning off the fuel into jerry cans is relatively common in Nigeria.

More burnt corpses are being recovered from the waters around the pipeline but no injured people have been found. According to the BBC, local people are reluctant to admit they were connected with the explosion as in the past even relatives of those involved have been prosecuted for stealing petroleum.

The tragedy is only the latest of similar events. In 1998 more than 1,000 were killed in an explosion at the town of Jesse in the Delta state, and in the following years more than another 1,000 people have died in several incidents in the Delta, in Lagos and in Abia state.

Exploitation of the country's oil resources by the West has not resulted in any amelioration of the desperate poverty that lies behind these incidents. According to the International Monetary Fund's own figures, during the three decades from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, oil generated about \$350 billion for Nigeria, whilst the number of Nigerians living in poverty, i.e., on less than a dollar a day, rose from 36 percent to 70 percent and per capita gross domestic product fell from \$1,113 to \$1,084 in purchasing power parity terms.

The last few months have seen a dramatic rise in insurgency in the oil-producing Niger delta region, both contributing to and taking advantage of the growing world demand for oil. The upsurge reflects growing anger with the regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo that has failed to use any of its increased oil revenues for the benefit of the population. In fact, the government is using windfall earnings from high oil prices to pay off \$12.4 billion in arrears and debts to Western banks.

A new group which has come to the fore is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which claims to represent the Ijaw people, Nigeria's fourth-largest ethnic group and the majority tribe in the delta. It is demanding \$1.5 billion in compensation from Royal Dutch Shell for environmental pollution, as well as a greater share of government oil revenues.

"To achieve our goal of altogether halting oil exports, we must visit every inch of the delta," says MEND, which has launched a series of attacks on oil installations using motorboats armed with machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. Since last December it has killed about 20 soldiers and police, kidnapped several foreign oil workers, who were later released unharmed, and has shut down a quarter of the country's 2.4 million barrels per day (bpd) crude oil output. It claims that it has "no desire or interest in abducting for ransom," but is demanding the total shutdown of all oil production in the delta and the evacuation of all foreigners. MEND is said to have widespread support in the local population, and denies it finances its operations from oil siphoned from the pipelines.

MEND is demanding the release of two prominent Ijaw leaders, Alliaji Dokubo Asari, head of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force/Salvation Front (NDPVF/SF), and Diepreye Alamieseyeigha, former governor of the delta's Bayelsa state and ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) member.

Asari is charged with treason over an alleged plot to overthrow the government, whilst Alamieseyeigha was rearrested after jumping bail from the UK late last year, where he was held following a request from the Nigerian regime having been charged with laundering \$13 million in public funds. But many believe that Alamieseyeigha is being persecuted by the Obasanjo regime since he demanded that half the revenue from oil should be set aside for the delta states where it is produced, rather than the allocation of 13 percent stipulated in the constitution.

MEND is an umbrella for several militias that have been fighting in the delta for years and according to *Africa Confidential* is closely associated with the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC)—Ijaw politicians and businessmen who are opposed to the Nigerian government on a tribalist basis.

Of all the oil companies in Nigeria, Shell is most exposed to risk of attack, having dozens of oilfields, over 6,000 km of pipelines, 87 flow stations, eight gas plants and more than 1,000 wells in the region. More recent entrants, such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Total and Italy's ENI, have many of their installations located offshore in the Gulf of Guinea. These installations were previously seen as secure as they have been less exposed to rebel activity, though MEND recently kidnapped oil workers from an offshore oilfield.

Shell first discovered oil in the delta in 1958 and its impact on the local environment has been a source of deep concern and resentment from the population. There have been numerous oil spills and also gas flares burning 24 hours a day—some of them for the last 30 years—which emit a deadly poison. Air pollution from the flares results in acid rain and respiratory problems in the surrounding community, which has caused in the last year in Bayelsa state alone 5,000 cases of respiratory diseases and 120,000 asthma attacks, and forced thousands to escape the pollution by heading for the ghettos of Port Harcourt and Lagos. In addition, the villagers have to live with the constant noise of the flare, and the area is covered in thick soot, which contaminates water supplies when it rains. Shell pipelines also pass above ground through villages and over what was once agricultural land.

“It is like paradise and hell. They have everything. We have nothing,” complained Eghare Ojhogar, a local chief. “If we protest, they send soldiers. They sign agreements with us and then ignore us.”

The Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC) has evacuated hundreds of staff from the western delta and shut down roughly 455,000 barrels of daily production, about a fifth of Nigeria's total output. A senior Shell security official said that between 50 and 70 Shell employees had been kidnapped over the previous year. “We have withdrawn staff from the western delta and will not return until it is safe to do so,” the company said. SPDC, which produces 43 percent of Nigerian crude, loses 10 percent of its production every day through sabotage and illegal siphoning, known in Nigeria as “bunkering.”

Oil companies support the Nigerian army's brutal reprisals against militias. Chevron Nigeria, the leading US exporter of Nigerian crude, lent the federal government its terminal at Escravos and its helicopters, so that government forces could raid communities hostile to the company. The oil companies

also play on local rivalries, for example, with Chevron making the Itsekris, a rival tribal grouping to the Ijaws, the main beneficiary of its development programme.

Many oil facilities are also guarded by Nigerian security forces known as the “spy police,” who are regarded by the local community as mercenaries. They are trained and paid by the oil companies, who have also increasingly brought in their own “security consultants”—ex-military from the US, UK and South Africa. Erinys and Olive Group, which both worked for oil companies in Iraq, are now active in Nigeria, as are other UK-based security groups such as Control Risks and Armour Group. These security forces have proved unable to deal with MEND's attacks.

The Nigerian government is ill-equipped to handle the well-coordinated operations carried out by MEND in the delta, a vast network of mangrove creeks and swamps. It is estimated that the country would need 200 patrol boats to cover the 70,000 sq km of the main delta, and currently has only a fraction of that. The police are said to be poorly trained and ill-equipped.

The United States has been reluctant to supply the regime with more boats, citing the widespread corruption in Nigeria's administration as the reason. Obasanjo was recently supplied with some patrol boats by China and has increasingly turned to Beijing for support.

Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) has recently approved the acquisition of a 45 percent working interest in a deep offshore block by China National Offshore Oil Corporation Limited (CNOOC), which will pay \$2.3 billion and will also refund the \$600 million already spent by French firm Total in the development of the field.

The emergence of China as a factor in African politics has given Obasanjo a certain amount of room to manoeuvre. Until now he has been heavily dependent on US support. He is now preparing to amend the constitution so that he can stand for a third term as president.

When Obasanjo was first elected in 1999 and Nigeria returned to civilian rule there were widespread illusions that the inequality in Nigerian society would be redressed. In fact, poverty has worsened and the elite continue to enrich themselves at the expense of the majority of society, while oil wealth pours into the coffers of the banks and international financial institutions.



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