

Another deadly pipeline explosion in Nigeria

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Hundreds of people were killed December 26 when a gas pipeline exploded in a poor neighborhood in Lagos, Nigeria, the latest in a series of similar tragedies that have claimed the lives of thousands of people in the oil-rich yet impoverished African nation. The blast occurred as hundreds of residents of the Ebule Egba district of Lagos surrounded the punctured state-owned pipeline, and were collecting the gasoline in cans, buckets and plastic bags.

Red Cross officials counted 269 dead and many more severely burned, but the number of casualties could rise sharply once all of the injured are accounted for. Residents say many of the wounded have not sought medical care for fear that they would be arrested and prosecuted for tampering with the pipeline, or simply because they are too poor to afford hospital treatment.

Tuesday's explosion was followed by another pipeline blast in Lagos on Thursday. There was no immediate word on casualties. Adeola Adefolabi, a Lagos government official, said the blast was in a northern neighborhood of Nigeria's largest city. A Nigerian Red Cross official, Ige Oladimeji, said his workers were heading to the site, but had no information on injuries.

In May at least 150 people were killed in a similar explosion near Lagos. Over the previous eight years there were at least six other pipeline explosions, including a massive blast in October 1998 that killed at least 1,500 people in the southern town of Jesse. The repeated explosions and massive loss of life underscore the enormous social inequality in Africa's largest oil producer and most populous nation. While the country's resources have enriched western oil companies and banks, as well as the corrupt rule elite in Nigeria, masses of ordinary people face chronic fuel shortages and rising prices, and are willing to risk life and limb "tapping" into pipelines that snake through the country's working class neighborhoods. The sale of

a can of petrol on the black market can bring a poor Nigerian the equivalent of two weeks' wages.

President Olusegun Obasanjo blamed "vandals" for the fatal explosion and said the stealing of gasoline continued despite his warnings that it was "not only illegal but a dangerous pursuit." The president's spokeswoman added that "law-abiding citizens" should "rise up and say never again will we allow these kinds of things to [happen] to our citizenry."

According to the government, a criminal gang had been tapping into the pipeline for months and hauling fuel off in tanker trucks for resale. The previous night, however, the conduit was not fully sealed and within a short time hundreds of nearby residents had come to the pipe to siphon off fuel. "There were mothers there, little children," Emmanuel Unokhua, an engineer who lives nearby the site of the blast told the Associated Press. "I was begging them to go back." Unokhua said residents splashed him with gasoline to drive him off and also doused police officers who tried unsuccessfully to control the crowd. "They were not arresting anyone, because they had no vehicle to put them in," the engineer said. "There are plenty of vehicles for the dead bodies now."

The blaze following the explosion kept rescue workers away from the scene for hours. When they finally reached the area they found a scene of carnage, including scores of charred bodies, incinerated homes and cars and melted wires. A blood bank has been set up by the National Emergency Management Agency and the government has set aside 50 hospital beds and put 20 plastic surgeons along with 40 nurses on stand-by. But hospital officials said they lack the equipment and expertise to deal with the many severe cases. Burns typically covered between 60 and 100 percent of victims' bodies. "To have any chance of a normal life, most of the injured need expert plastic surgeons and we just don't have enough," he said.

Soot released into the atmosphere following the blast is a health risk, Sikuade Jagun, the director of the Lagos State Ambulance Services, told reporters. He advised residents with breathing difficulties to seek medical help. “That environment is unhealthy for people living and working in the area, and even for those involved in the rescue,” he told reporters. “My advice is that people should not stay too long in the area.”

Despite high global crude prices, the regime of President Obasanjo has failed to use 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. 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 proportion of Nigerians living in poverty, i.e., on less than a dollar a day, rose from 36 percent to 70 percent of the population and per capita gross domestic product fell from \$1,113 to \$1,084 in purchasing power parity terms.

Under the terms of an IMF debt package, Obasanjo has been instituting “market reforms,” including blocking “excessive” wage demands, deregulating fuel prices and privatizing state-owned oil refineries. At the same time the president—who was first elected in 1999, after years of military rule—is continuing the repressive policy of his predecessors against ethnic minorities in the Niger Delta, such as the Ijaw and Ogoni, who are demanding compensation for environmental damage done to their villages, fields and fisheries, and a greater share of oil revenues. The military reprisals have been given tacit and direct support by foreign oil producers such as Shell and Chevron Nigeria, the leading US exporter of Nigerian crude, which lent the federal government its terminal at Escravos and its helicopters so that government forces could raid communities hostile to the company.

The US is Nigeria’s largest customer for crude oil, accounting for 40 percent of the country’s total oil exports. Nigeria provides between seven and nine percent of overall US oil imports—a percentage that is expected to grow—and is the fifth-largest source of imported oil for the US. In recent years US military officials, in the name of the supposed “war on

terrorism,” have initiated discussions regarding the establishment of permanent military bases in Senegal, Ghana, and Mali in West Africa. According to the Wall Street Journal, “a key mission for U.S. forces [in Africa] would be to insure that Nigeria’s oilfields, which in the future could account for as much as 25 percent of all US oil imports, are secure.”

Bode Kuforiji, a university lecturer and a witness to the Tuesday’s tragedy in Lagos, asked pointedly, “How can this be, that people are so poor in Nigeria that they will risk their lives for a little thing? But boats leave for America every day filled with oil.”



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