
Nigeria: Gas flaring – major contributor to climate change and human rights abuses

Nigeria holds 11,700 square kilometers of mangrove forest: the third largest in the world and the largest in Africa. Most of this mangrove is found in the Niger Delta.

Nigeria is also a major oil producer and most oil extraction takes place in the Niger Delta. There, petroleum or crude oil abounds in rock formations. The complex mixture of hydrocarbons and other organic compounds that make up the flammable liquid fossil fuel is extracted from oil wells found in those oil fields.

When crude oil is pumped out it also drags associated gas with it. Such natural gas could be separated from the oil and be used but oil companies prefer to burn it off. Shell-BP was the first one to start with this practice in the 1960s.

Flaring of natural gas associated to oil extraction has been internationally acknowledged as a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions and a major contributor to climate change. In combustion, gaseous hydrocarbons react with atmospheric oxygen to form carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Gas flaring also causes acid rain which acidifies lakes and streams and damages vegetation, produces air pollution, and can lead to leukemia or asthma and premature death.

Though the British government implemented domestic policies to reduce gas flaring to a minimum at home, the same criteria does not apply to British companies in Nigeria, where gas flaring is still carried out by Shell as well as other corporations that control oil business such as Agip, ExxonMobil, Texaco, TotalFinaElf and Chevron.

It's just a matter of money –and power. Of money, because in places that lack infrastructure to make use of the associated gas and are far from potential markets –as is the case with the Niger Delta mangroves- it's cheaper to simply burn the gas off, despite the damaging impacts. Of power, because transnational corporations have the leverage to impose their commercial interest over the health, livelihoods and human rights of local communities thus showing their disregard for people. Despite an Act passed in 1984 that technically declared that gas flaring was illegal, the oil industry still flares billions of cubic meters of gas a year.

Through chimneys, released gas is burnt bringing up sizeable non-stop orange glowing flames whose fumes and huge heat lead to mangrove destruction and degradation, and spread conflicts and death (see WRM Bulletin N° 56).

In spite of being a major oil producer, Nigeria is among the world's poorest nations thus proving that oil based economies in Southern countries just enrich a tiny group of transnationals and local elites. Furthermore, the country suffers chronic energy shortages.

A huge amount of suffering, repression and death have accompanied the long-standing opposition to

the impacts of oil production including pollution and gas flaring in Nigeria. Last September, during a community interactive forum on the impact of gas flaring at Iwherekan community, Delta State, Nigerian soldiers guarding gas flaring sites operated by Shell arrested about 25 persons attending the forum.

Among the detainees were community elders, women, children, members of Environmental Rights Action /Friends of the Earth and journalists from national newspapers and television stations including the Federal Government-owned Nigeria Television Authority (NTA); the camera of the NTA crew was seized and confiscated.

On November 14, 2005, Shell had been ordered to stop gas flaring in Iwherekan Community by April 2007. The rule of a Federal High court acknowledged that the practice of gas flaring violated the fundamental right to life and dignity and was the result of a suit filed on July 20, 2005 by Mr. Jonah Gbemre on behalf of himself and the Iwherekan community against Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Attorney General of the Federation.

However, the company went on with the lethal practice of burning gas. People have expressed their concern and the arrest apparently was to intimidate the community and prevent environmentalists from their continued campaign for an end to gas flaring.

Nnimmo Bassey, ERA/FoEN Executive Director, declared: "This action has shown clearly that this government is not concerned about the impact of gas flaring on the livelihoods and health of Niger Delta people. It is also a clear evidence that what this administration has to offer for the genuine agitation of Niger Delta people for an end to gas flaring is, intimidation, crude force and cover ups. It is so sad that this has happened under a government that has gone to the roof top to profess its belief in the rule of law".

Article based on information from: "Gas Flaring, LAC & Climate Change", Keith R, Temas Actuales LLC, <http://www.temasactuales.com/temasblog/environmental-protection/gas-flaring-lac-climate-change/> ; "Gas Flaring Disrupts Life in Oil-Producing Niger Delta", Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, NPR, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12175714> ; "Press Release: Environmentalists Denounce Arrests in Gas Flaring-Affected Community", Environmental Rights Action / Friends of the Earth Nigeria, http://www.eraction.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=133:press-release-environmentalists-denounce-arrests-in-gas-flaring-affectedcommunity&catid=9