
Nigeria: Godforsaken by oil

The Niger Delta is one of the world's largest wetlands, and the largest in Africa: it encompasses over 20,000 square kilometers. It is a vast floodplain built up by the accumulation of centuries of silt washed down the Niger and Benue Rivers, composed of four main ecological zones --coastal barrier islands, mangroves, fresh water swamp forests, and lowland rainforests-- whose boundaries vary according to the patterns of seasonal flooding.

The mangrove forest of Nigeria is the third largest in the world and the largest in Africa; over 60 percent of this mangrove, or 6,000 square kilometers, is found in the Niger Delta. The freshwater swamp forests of the delta reach 11,700 square kilometers and are the most extensive in west and central Africa. The Niger Delta region has the high biodiversity characteristic of extensive swamp and forest areas, with many unique species of plants and animals. It also contains 60 - 80 per cent of all Nigerian plant and animal species. The Niger Delta alone has 134 fresh water and brackish water fish species as compared with 192 for the entire continent of Europe

All that is being destroyed, within the framework of widespread human rights violations, by oil transnationals such as Shell, Agip, Mobil, Texaco and Chevron. As Nnimmo Bassey from Oilwatch says: "The story of oil and gas in Africa is the story of rogue exploitation, despoliation and bizarre brigandage. It is a story of pollution, displacement and pillage. It is a montage of burnt rivers, burnt forests and maimed lives. An oil well is a death sentence if it is located in your backyard."

Perhaps the best description of the essence of oil exploitation is the one overheard by Nnimmo while standing at the Johannesburg International Airport behind two US oil industry workers based in Nigeria. "Just imagine," one said, "how crude oil is always found in Godforsaken places." "No," the partner replied, "it is crude oil exploitation that makes those places Godforsaken." Amen.

To the government and oil TNCs, the Niger Delta's biodiversity and peoples mean nothing. What matters is only the oil hidden underneath. Nature and people are simply obstacles to be removed. The Niger Delta produces 3.2 per cent of the world's oil requirements. Oil exports make up over 90 per cent of Nigeria's export income, bringing the government a daily revenue of \$20 million.

But in spite of the brutality of the TNC-government alliance, people continue resisting the destruction of their environment and livelihoods. Such resistance is fraught with danger. Ken Saro-Wiwa, a leader of the Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), struggling against the destruction of Ogoniland by oil companies, was "legally" assassinated --by hanging-- in November 1995, but his message is as strong as ever. Ken described the environment in Ogoni as having been "completely devastated by three decades of reckless oil exploitation or ecological warfare by Shell.... An ecological war is highly lethal, the more so as it is unconventional. It is omnicidal in effect. Human life, flora, fauna, the air, fall at its feet, and finally, the land itself dies."

It would perhaps be a good idea to ask the "distinguished delegates" of the countries where the relevant TNCs are based, as well as to the "distinguished delegates" of Nigeria present at the upcoming Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity: is this what you mean

by biodiversity conservation?

Article based on information from: Bassey, Nnimmo, "Oil and Gas in Africa", FoE Nigeria, November 2001. Nick Ashton-Jones with Susi Arnott and Oronto Douglas, "The Human Ecosystems of the Niger Delta - An ERA Handbook". Nigeria, ERA, 1999,
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/nigeria/Nigew991-05.htm> . Mudiaga Ofuoku, "Review of latest ERA handbook: The Human Ecosystems of the Niger Delta."
<http://www.essentialaction.org/shell/era/eraReview.html>