
Chad-Cameroon: Oil revenues versus human rights and environment

“This is the world’s most scrutinized and controlled project,” retorted a senior French official in Chad to representatives of Chadian human rights organizations who went to see him in March 2001. “There is absolutely nothing to worry about”, he added. However, many people are very worried and have been fighting against the project for a very long time.

Indeed, the international campaign on the Chad/Cameroon Oil and Pipeline project which was spearheaded by African NGOs and supported by NGOs throughout the world, has been very successful in terms of getting the project to include numerous pre-cautionary measures designed to make the project environmentally and socially more responsible. For example, the pipeline was re-routed to avoid some of the biodiversity-rich areas, an Oversight Committee which includes civil society representatives was established in Chad to ensure that the oil revenues be used for poverty alleviation and, overall the role of civil society, local communities and indigenous peoples has been highlighted in the official documents. Furthermore, an International Advisory Group has been established whose task is to monitor the environmental and social impacts of the project as well as “governance” issues, which include human rights. At least on paper, all these measures indicate a serious departure from the previous laissez-faire approach in which the World Bank and the private companies it supports would leave it to recipient governments, no matter how corrupt, to manage the projects according to their own interests.

Despite these impressive changes on paper, there are serious doubts about what all these measures amount to in practice, since they cannot be considered in isolation from the countries’ overall political situation. The most recent U.S. State Department’s Reports on Human Rights confirm that both governments continue to commit serious human rights abuses with impunity and that citizens do not have access to an independent judicial system.

Chadian and Cameroonian NGOs demanded a moratorium on the funding decision until proven safeguards were in place to ensure that the project would not lead to further human rights violations and environmental destruction. However the governments, the oil companies and their international financial backers were in a hurry and the project was approved in June 2000.

The fears of the NGOs were soon thereafter confirmed when the Chadian government used a part of its first payment from the oil companies for weapons purchases (see WRM Bulletin 41). Despite World Bank claims that the Oversight Committee is working, no regulations concerning its functioning have been published. In addition, the government’s draft implementation decree proposes a decision-making process based on a simple majority system which would assure that the government would always have the majority. Furthermore it severely reduces the area of intervention for the Oversight Committee and requires that it only report to the government.

Construction of the pipeline of Cameroon will destroy biodiversity, especially in the littoral rainforest which is inhabited by the indigenous Bakola people. As required by World Bank environmental policies, the World Bank requested that the Government create a protected area to compensate for the loss of biodiversity. However, the off-set area, the Campo Reserve, is now being threatened by a

French logging company which is part of the well-known Bollore Group which has close connections to the Cameroonian government.

The International Advisory Group, which is headed by a former Senegalese Prime-Minister, is about to make its first field visit to Chad and Cameroon. The effectiveness of the group will depend on its ability to cut through the public relations efforts that are likely to surround its visit and establish independent relationships with the affected communities and the NGOs on-the-ground.

Independently of the IAG's work, the World Bank's Inspection Panel has just registered a claim presented by a Chadian member of parliament who represents the oil-producing region and 120 local residents. The claim states that local people and their environment have or are likely to suffer as a result of the World Bank violating its own policies. It is only after World Bank management has had a chance to respond to the allegations that the World Bank Board of Executive Directors will decide whether the Inspection Panel should be allowed to investigate the claim or not. Given the controversial nature of the project and climate of political oppression in both Chad and Cameroon, the World Bank's credibility would be seriously damaged if it should fail to get to the bottom of the allegations made by the claimants who are risking jail, torture and assassination for speaking up.

Perhaps the most positive outcome of the international campaign on the project so far has been the strengthening of civil society organizations in Chad and Cameroon. Despite enormous difficulties and danger, there are plans for a coordinated NGO-effort to monitor the oil fields and pipeline construction with the goal of preventing a humanitarian and ecological disaster. These efforts deserve the international community's full support.

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