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## Nigeria: Poverty, oil pipelines and death

Blaming the victims is common practice in many places. In the case of Nigeria, such practice can only be defined as criminal. On July 11, more than 200 villagers from Adeje died when a gasoline pipeline exploded. Many others suffer from terrible injuries. The media reports that "the victims were villagers who were scooping up gasoline after the pipeline, which carries refined petroleum products from Warri to northern Nigeria, was punctured by thieves on Sunday night." So they were thieves and those who punctured the pipeline were "vandals". As easy as that. End of the story. For the government, "several lives" were lost and "a vital petroleum products pipeline" destroyed.

Any more or less responsible journalist should have asked why people are "vandalizing" the pipelines and why people are "stealing" gasoline. Even worse: the news carry the necessary information to reach the obvious conclusions. But the conclusions are not there. The blame is on the victims.

Nigeria, says the Associated Press, "is the world's sixth-largest oil exporter, accounting for about one-twelfth of the oil imported by the United States. Sales of crude oil account for more than 80 percent of the government's revenue." The same agency informs that "some cases of sabotage are carried out by militant activists trying to force the government and oil companies to compensate communities for land use and alleged pollution. In other cases, villagers break open the pipeline and collect the gushing fuel to make a crude mixture of oil and gasoline for cheap generators and other motors."

The above information shows that local communities have not been compensated for their lands, that their environment has been polluted and that none of the wealth generated by oil has "trickled down" to local communities. People don't go about vandalizing oil pipelines just for fun - almost 500 cases of vandalism were reported in 1999- nor do they collect gasoline to be sold on the roads as a hobby. The former is done through anger and frustration and the latter for dire need. The Associated Press itself links these issues by saying that "pipeline sabotage is common in poverty-wracked Nigeria." An official of the state-run Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation came closer to honesty when he said -requesting anonymity- that vandalisation of fuel pipelines was "rampant" in the region, adding: "The issue is not just sabotage. It is simply stealing of fuel to survive."

A government statement, signed by Information Minister Jerry Gana, said that Nigeria has spent "enormous resources" to educate people about the need to "protect installations and oil pipelines so as to avoid these tragic accidents which have always resulted in loss of lives and property." So the official conclusion is that people continue being ignorant in spite of the government's educational activities!

People are not ignorant. They need to survive. They need a healthy environment to live in. And that's what they are trying to do in different manners. The blame for this tragedy is not on the people. It's on the greed of oil corporations -none of the major ones were named in the news- and on the government's unwillingness to protect its own people and environment.

At least 100 killed in Nigerian oil pipeline explosion July 11, 2000;

