
Nigeria: Shell sets forests on fire

In October 1999 the Nigerian Minister of the Environment himself blamed multinational oil companies for the situation reigning in the Niger Delta, and gave them a six-week ultimatum to clean up the communities' environment affected by several oil spills (see WRM Bulletin 28). However, nothing much seems to have changed.

For six months -from 10 June 1998 to December 1998- a pipeline belonging to Shell Petroleum Development Company Limited (SPDC) in Kolo Creek, at Num River watershed, burst and discharged crude oil into the Oyara mangrove forests, endangering Otuegwe 1, a small rural community with predominantly indigenous population devoted to farming and fishing. Due to heavy rains that occurred during this period, the oil spill dispersed into surrounding water streams, farms and sacred sites of the Otuegwe. To face the accusations that blamed the company, Shell opted to blame the victims, and attributed the spill to an act of sabotage. Thus it declined to assume the responsibility of repairing the leaking pipeline.

Local communities of farmers and fisherfolk, which had to suffer not only from health hazards but also from the impacts of the spill on their natural resources, started a campaign with the help of the Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation (ND-HERO). At last Shell had to respond to such pressure and hired Willbros Nigerian Ltd to repair the leakage. The company also chose an "environmentally responsible" way of eliminating the remaining residue of the oil spill: it set fire to vast extents of forest! This strategy of forest burning seems to be the official policy of Shell as a means of "cleaning" crude oil spills in the Niger Delta. Other communities of the Niger Delta, as Obelele and Igebiri, have witnessed this same Shell policy, and already 3,500 km² have been destroyed by the effect of the drastic method of provoking intentional fires.

As a result of the negative impacts of this activity, people of the Niger Delta do not want the oil companies in general -and Shell in particular- any longer in their territories. However, oil transnationals and the Federal Government continue to ignore the communities' claims, who have to pay the high cost of cheap oil. "We promise to listen", says Shell in its web page. But in the Niger Delta, the company seems to have become almost completely deaf.

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