
Environmental racism in Nigeria

There is ample proof that oil prospection and extraction constitutes a major cause of forest degradation and destruction, which brings with it also the loss of forest dwellers' livelihoods and territories. In tropical countries oil companies generally act with strong support from local governments. Nigeria, and especially its Niger Delta region, is a paradigmatic case of this situation, that we have addressed in previous WRM Bulletin issues (see nrs. 22, 23, 27 and 28).

As a result of the visit that representatives from US social and environmental organizations made to the Niger Delta region in September 1999, the NGO "Global Exchange and Essential Action" has recently published a report titled "Oil For Nothing: Multinational Corporations, Environmental Destruction, Death and Impunity in the Niger Delta." The report says that Chevron, Shell, Mobil, Elf and Agip, "act as a destabilizing force, pitting one community against another, and acting as a catalyst -together with the military with whom they work closely- to some of the violence racking the region today." It underscores that even if during the last 40 years both the Nigerian government and oil multinationals have made huge profits out of the oil extracted from the Niger Delta, the region undergoes high unemployment and poverty rates, corruption, repression, failing crops, declining fisheries, polluted waters, dying forests and vanishing wildlife. Far from contributing to the welfare of the region, oil corporations, the government and the military have exploited ethnic differences in the Delta, as well as menaced and murdered people to avoid any opposition attempt.

Nevertheless, resistance by the Niger Delta peoples continues. Last February the Ijaw National Youth called on the government and the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta to enter into genuine dialogue with local communities "on the matter of resource control, self-determination and a truly federal Nigeria." At the international level, abuses by the military to the detriment of local dwellers are continually being denounced. The government's announcement last October of strict conditions for oil firms to clean up the communities' environment was cautiously but well received by environmental and social organizations. However, there are still no clear signs showing that things have really changed for the better.

It is interesting to point out that "Oil for nothing" was released in the US, coinciding with mounting opposition against a major Chevron refinery in California which is being accused of releasing dangerous pollutants. Several cases of environmental racism -such as the location of polluting industries among poor, generally black communities- have been denounced in that country. It is the same racism that Northern oil companies show with regards to people and the environment in Nigeria.

Sources. Ijaw National Congress, 29/1/2000 and 5/2/2000;