
Nigeria: threatened mangroves

Thousands of hectares of mangrove forest and fresh water swamps of the Niger Delta, in the Cross River State, will be destroyed by ongoing oil exploitation activities. Responsible for the situation are the companies Moni Polu Nigeria Limited, that in early 1998 started its oil prospections in the area, and Nobles Drilling, which was contracted to start drilling oil wells. By December 1998 about 8 oil wells had been sunk. A 1000 km long pipeline, that will pass through over 25 communities, has also been programmed. In spite of the letters of protest sent by Nigerian environmental NGOs to the firms involved and to the national authorities, the new phase of the project will start without the accomplishment of the required Environmental Impact Assessment.

Oil prospection and exploitation are known worldwide for their negative environmental and social impact at the local level: loss of indigenous peoples' or peasants' lands, health problems, destruction of rainforests, pollution of water sources and air. At a global level, more extraction means more fuel consumption and liberation of CO₂ to the atmosphere, the most relevant gas causing global warming. In the specific case of Nigeria, the military intimidate local populations, burn their houses and even kill the villagers that resist oil related activities in their lands. Several cases of human rights abuses have been denounced, as testified by the long struggle of the Ogoni people against Shell in Ogoniland and the most recent facts involving Chevron in the Delta State.

Oil industry is a very important factor of mangrove destruction in Nigeria, but not the only one. The Federal Government is suspected of having recently awarded a contract for the dredging of the upper River Niger from Warri to Baro, in the northern region of the country. Since mangroves are fragile forest ecosystems highly dependent on continuous water feeding, this project could gravely affect them, which could bring about the loss of livelihoods for their inhabitants. It is feared that the Niger Delta area, situated downstream of the location of the dredging project, and which has suffered for years much environmental degradation and social conflicts due to the activities of the oil industry, is further compounded with the works to be undertaken.

Nigeria has lost between 70 and 80% of its original forests and nowadays the area of its territory occupied by forests is reduced to 12% even if the entire country is located in the humid tropics. Having the largest population in Africa (115,000,000 inhabitants in 1996) it registers levels of 40% of illiteracy, while GNP per capita is only U\$S 240. The authorities seem to ignore this reality and prefer to devote funds and efforts to megaprojects as the above referred, regardless of the real needs and aspirations of local communities.

Source: Late Friday News, 33rd Edition, 27/3/99; The World Guide 1999-2000.