

Big Trouble for Big Oil

Chevron up Shit Creek in Niger Delta

Direct action across the whole of the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria has been steadily increasing in the late 1990s since the Ogoni mobilisation of a few years before initiated a radical challenge to the Nigerian military state and its funders, the transnational oil companies of Shell, Chevron, Agip and Co. Despite the death of dictator Abacha*, a year of his military successor Abubakar, and finally the installation of civilian president and former military head of state Obasanjo this May, the piracy of resources from the oil communities continues and the pollution and poverty which sparked the protests are unchanged. In fact, Obasanjo himself enacted the Land Use Decree that legislated for the theft of mineral wealth.

The peaceful mass rallies of the Ogonis, led by the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and Ken Saro-Wiwa, were a very real threat to the oil companies across the Delta, and in fact succeeded in forcing Shell out of Ogoni. With the Ogoni activism beginning to be emulated by other ethnic groups from 1993 onwards, the regime in collaboration with Shell brought a ruthless clamp-down on the people, killing two thousand, making refugees of tens of thousands of others, and, in 1995, hanging Saro-Wiwa and his eight colleagues. Ogoni was made an example of, but the spirit of resistance was not crushed and agitation for environmental and political justice began to build across the region amongst diverse ethnic groups.

Campaigning by the pan-Niger Delta group Chicoco to make links at the grassroots, and activity by others such as Environmental Rights Action (ERA) has strengthened the resolve of people to demand the rights that have been denied to them all the way through from colonial theft to neo-colonial free trade.

From 1997 occupations of oil flow stations have become increasingly common, with Nigeria's oil output often cut by up to one third for short periods of time.

The desperation felt by so many in the Delta, however, particularly by young men, has led to action of all kinds, from the taking hostage of oil workers to inter-ethnic clashes which have left hundreds dead. These actions play into the hands of the State and oil companies who are happy to continue to work under a military shield, but represent one end of a spectrum of action being taken against those with oil wealth and power.

*I REALISED THEN—IF YOU
WANT SOMETHING DONE
THEN YOU'VE GOT TO DO IT
YOURSELF—DIRECT ACTION
IS THE ANSWER —*



*HIT THE BASTARDS
WHERE IT HURTS ---
IN THE WALLET —*

In December 1998 radicals from the Ijaw ethnic group, who comprise around 8 million people living on much of the oil-bearing land of the Delta, met at a traditional Ijaw town to issue the strongest demands yet. The Kaiama Declaration of December 11, issued by the newly formed Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and with considerable support from the elders, attributed the political crisis in Nigeria to the issue of control of resources, and resolved that all land and natural resources belonged to the Ijaw communities. The military were told to leave the region and oil companies told they would be considered enemies of the people if they called on military protection. The companies were given until December 30 to leave, the date when further action to implement the Declaration was promised.

We, therefore, demand that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. We are tired of gas flaring, oil spillages, blowouts and being labelled saboteurs and terrorists

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we advise all oil companies staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th December 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta.

On December 28, as the deadline approached, the IYC announced the launch of Operation Climate Change, to run from January 1 to 10 in the new year, with peaceful action to extinguish gas flares across the Delta. Two warships and up to 15,000 troops were immediately deployed. Peaceful rallies and dances were held across Ijawland, but troops responded in Yenagoa by shooting dozens dead and rampaging through the town, and seizing unarmed protesters for torture and arbitrary detention. Citizens of Kaiama itself also suffered severe repression.

A state of emergency was soon imposed, and meetings and demonstrations banned. Beatings and shootings continued, and many women were raped by soldiers. Several flow stations were occupied and attempts made to shut down the flares. On January 11 hundreds of women from Niger Delta Women for Justice, in conjunction with the IYC, marched to deliver a letter to the military administrator of Rivers State to complain about their treatment. They too were shot at and tear gas used, and many publicly stripped and beaten.

And outside of mobilisation around the Kaiama Declaration, further direct action was being taken against the oil companies. On January 4, soldiers using a helicopter and boats owned by Chevron attacked protesters who were occupying a drilling rig over a pollution compensation claim, killing over fifty people and destroying dozens of homes. A similar incident happened in May 1998 and the company has been particularly obstructive with respect to the investigations into both cases. In fact, Chevron Chair and CEO Ken Derr publicly stated to US shareholders in April 1999 that the company would not officially demand that soldiers refrain from shooting protesters.

Back in Nigeria, Chief Joshua Fumudoh, president of the Ijaw National Council, blamed the violence meted out on the Ijaw on State intransigence and a refusal to negotiate with those at the grassroots. The Kaiama Declaration merely repeated several demands made over and over again by the people, and the only panacea for continued

peaceful co-existence in this country is for each ethnic nationality to have meaningful control over its own environment and resources and to use them for self-development in accordance with each nationality's aspirations.

Since the worst atrocities in December and January troops have continued random attacks on Ijaw people and foreign journalists have also been targeted for harassment and detention. Those living in the Delta have been promised development and meetings to address grievances, but positive change has never appeared from above. Activists feel that no government or oil company initiatives will bring justice, and have pledged that the education and mobilisation will continue. Since the period of mourning announced following Operation Climate Change, the next stage of building the movement has begun. The Kaiama Declaration and the events of December and January are only a foretaste of things to come.

*According to scurrilous rumour, this may have happened as a result of over-enthusiastic use of Viagra. With any luck, other aging dictators with heart conditions will follow suit and start dropping like flies... A potent tool for political change?



OTHER ISLANDS



We Thought it Was Oil—But it Was Blood

*The other day
We danced on the street
Joy in our hearts*

*We thought we were free
Three young folks fell to our right
Countless more fell to our left
Looking up,
ar from the crowd
We beheld
Red hot guns*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

*Heart jumping
Into our mouths
Floating on
Emotion's dry wells
We leapt with fury
Knowing it was't funny
Then we beheld
Bright red pools*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood
Tears don't flow*

*When you are scarred
First it was the Ogoni
Today it is Ijaws
Who will be slain this next day?
We see open mouths
But we hear no screams
Standing in a pool
Up to our knees
We thought it was oil
But it was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

*Dried tear bags
Polluted streams
Things are real
Only when found in dreams
We see their Shells
Behind military shields
Evil, horrible evil gallows
called oilrigs
Drilling our souls*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

*The heavens are open
Above our head*

*Toasted dreams in flared
And scrambled sky
A million black holes
In a burnt sky
But we know our dreams
Won't burst like crude pipes*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

*This we tell you
They may kill all
But the blood will speak
They may gain all
But the soil will RISE
We may die but stay alive
Placed on the slab
Slaughtered by the day
We are the living
Long sacrificed*

*We thought it was oil
But it was blood*

*We thought it was oil
But this was blood*

- Nnimmo Bassey

The long awaited DELTA No. 4 is now out: Ijaw resistance: beyond Kaiama; Killing with Chevron; Dialogue with the devil: how mainstream green groups are selling out; Interview with Vandana Shiva: direct action and indigenous culture; Racism and black involvement in the green movement, and LOADS more. Send some dosh to: DELTA, Box Z, 13 Biddulph Street, Leicester LE2 1BH, UK. Tel/fax: 0116 270 9616. E-mail: lynx@gn.apc.org Web: www.oneworld.org/delta