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Niger Delta Standoff

Kia Mistilis | July 9, 2009

Behind fighter-planes and gunboats, Nigerian forces launched a full-scale offensive in the Niger Delta on May 13, displacing 30,000 people and sparking a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of civilians fleeing destroyed villages are now trapped between armed resistance groups and the Nigerian military. These civilians are hiding in the bush without food, water, or medical supplies, let alone Internet access to alert the world of their plight, as Iranians are doing via Twitter.

Against the backdrop of a world energy crisis, the media are reporting the region's growing instability, mostly in terms of its effect on global oil supply and prices. For the 12 million people living in the Niger Delta, however, the struggle is about their survival.

Ecological Catastrophe

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation, with 150 million people. It's the world's seventh-largest oil-producing nation. Nearly all of Nigeria's oil [comes](#) from the Delta.

Since 1970, \$350 billion in oil revenue [has flowed](#) to Nigeria, yet 75% of Nigerians live on less than \$1 a day. Niger Delta communities continue to live in abject poverty, without schools, hospitals, or basic infrastructure, as oil profits fill the bank accounts of multinational oil companies and the Nigerian elite. Nigerian governments have negotiated joint ventures with multinational companies for unregulated oil production since 1958. Over 50 years of exploitation in the Niger Delta has resulted in [systematic human rights abuses](#) and environmental devastation.

According to an independent [2006 report](#) by environmental experts from the U.K, U.S and Nigeria, and convened by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, the Niger Delta is "one of the world's most severely petroleum-impacted ecosystems and one of the [top five](#) most polluted places on the face of the Earth." More than 1.5 million tons of oil, equivalent to one Exxon-Valdez disaster every year for 50 years, [have spilled](#) into the delta, poisoning delicate mangrove and rain forest ecosystems and destroying fishing and farming livelihoods. Constant gas flaring releases toxic chemicals into the atmosphere, causing cancer, birth defects, respiratory diseases, and acid rain so toxic it [corrodes metal roofs](#).

Oil Company Abuses

Evidence given in [recent U.S lawsuits](#) reveals Dutch Royal Shell and U.S.-owned Chevron's [complicity](#) with successive Nigerian governments in committing human rights abuses against civilians. From the early 1990s, these companies [have provided](#) financing, weapons, and transport to the military to violently suppress community opposition to their oil operations.

Both Shell and Chevron [requested](#) the direct intervention of the Nigerian security forces at their sites. The first recorded incident occurred in Umechem in 1990, after Shell sent a letter to the police commissioner, [stating](#): "[W]e request that you urgently provide us with security protection

(preferably mobile police force) at this location." The request was met, and security forces shot dead 80 people and destroyed 495 homes. Col. Paul Okuntimo, head of the Joint Military and Police Taskforce in the 1990s, part of the Nigerian security forces [widely known](#) for their corruption and abysmal human rights record, [stated](#) that he was paid or directed by Shell.

Nnimmo Bassey, executive director of Environmental Rights Action, cited plaintiff depositions in his [testimony](#) before a U.S. subcommittee hearing on human rights and the law last year. "Chevron regularly houses and feeds the security forces, including Army, Navy, and police, and pays them above their government salaries," he said. "Chevron personnel have reported 'leading' or 'supervising' Nigerian security forces in the course of their duties. Chevron provides transportation to the military and police in Chevron-leased helicopters and boats."

According to Nigerian activists, this is a story of people at risk of genocide at the hands of government and corporate sponsored terror. In 2007, Niger Delta Professionals for Development Director Joel Bisina [said](#) that "from 1999 to date, more than 20 communities have been wiped out completely and more than 50 000 persons killed by military bullets and no one is saying anything about it."

One Activist's Story

As a student leader, Suanu Kingston Bere protested the expansion of Shell's pipeline from Ogoniland to Northern Nigeria, when Shell was [paying](#) the Nigerian military to suppress protests in Ogoniland. He fled Nigeria in 1995, after two arrests and three months of detention and torture, spending five years in a Benin refugee camp before securing political asylum in the United States in September 2000.

Active in the National Union of Ogoni Students, Bere was directly inspired by non-violent activist leader Ken Saro-Wiwa and The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) he founded in 1990. After first hearing Saro-Wiwa speak at a rally in 1993, Bere joined MOSOP and began campaigning in towns and remote villages

He was present for key events in the Delta's history, witnessing the collusion between the Nigerian military and Shell to violently suppress peaceful resistance to their practices in Ogoniland. He currently lives in Oakland, California, and agreed to go public for the first time with what he witnessed and experienced in Nigeria.

Bere attended a protest with 10,000 Ogoni in Biara village on April 30, 1994 — the day U.S. pipeline contractor Willbros came to lay Shell's new pipeline. They were escorted by military personnel, who shouted to the villagers: "This is not your land, it belongs to the government and we are sent by the government and Shell to guard their workers to perform their work. If anyone interferes with the pipeline they will be arrested, shot, and killed." Bere says the protestors were standing in lines, chanting and protesting peacefully. Then the military started shooting into the crowd and throwing dynamite. After that day, Col. Okuntimo sent soldiers to Ogoniland with a "kill and go policy."

Bere was first arrested on May 22, 1994, and says the Nigerian military tortured him in detention for two months. "They used batons to flog my back and confess that I would not join MOSOP again," he said. "They used their gun butts to beat me all over my body until I passed out. They took a piece of iron, burnt it in the fire, and branded my back with it." According to Bassey, "former President Olesegun Obasanjo admitted in 2005 that Nigerian police and security regularly tortured and killed prisoners in their custody, acknowledging earlier [reports by Human Rights Watch](#) and others of systematic abuses by security forces."

Bere hid in the bush after another rally in November 1996 and says he had to run for his life. "I saw people burned alive, shot dead, others had their limbs cut off. They were brutal killings." He and 500 other people were arrested and taken to Bori prison camp. "I was tortured again, they used the same methods. I saw hundreds of people tortured, without food or water for days. Hundreds dying from beatings and gun wounds. I witnessed all those things. I was there."

A Tipping Point

Peaceful resistance of minority ethnic groups across the Niger Delta has been met with brutal military repression and the broken promises of oil companies, with no opportunity for dialogue or genuine negotiation in 50 years. In this environment, the armed resistance group, the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta Peoples (MEND) emerged in 2006. The group targeted oil installations and caused a 40% drop in supply, from 2.4 million to 1.3 million barrels per day, [according](#) to University of California-Berkeley geography professor Michael Watts. MEND claims it has the capacity to shut down oil production in four days.

Watts says the situation in the Niger Delta has now reached a tipping point. There is strong internal political pressure from powerful north and southwest constituencies to clamp down on armed groups and restore stability, so the oil companies don't flee and the oil wealth continues. The continuing military offensive confirms to militants that the government is intent on controlling oil at any cost.

The crisis in the Niger Delta comes at a point in history when issues of peak oil and world energy crisis are looming. Oil supply is a big issue for all stakeholders, and the tragic cost of protecting that supply in Nigeria is the current humanitarian crisis and war.

U.S. policy is closely aligned with guaranteeing oil supply from the Gulf of Guinea and the current situation has direct implications for U.S. interests in the region. Nigeria's high-quality oil is used in U.S. auto and gasoline markets and is therefore an important component of overall supply. With Nigerian oil expected to rise from 14% to 25% of U.S. petroleum imports by 2015, Washington should play a key role in brokering a peace agreement.

MEND has indicated it is open to dialogue and willing to negotiate. It has sought both from the Nigerian government in the last few years, but to no avail. Left unchecked, the region's descent into war threatens to become a humanitarian disaster.

A combined international effort is needed to demilitarize the Niger Delta and use diplomacy to broker a peace agreement. The United States should join with the EU to set the process in motion with a fact-finding mission that would give way to negotiations, along the same lines as the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland.

"We want the world to know what is happening to us," says Suanu Kingston Bere. "We want our rights and the freedom to express what belongs to us. These are our ancestral lands — we want an environmental clean up, and the Nigerian government and oil companies to pay royalties for what they have taken from us. We want to benefit from what God has given us. We do not want to die for it."

A contributor to [Foreign Policy In Focus](#), Kia Mistilis is an independent journalist and photographer based in San Francisco. She has documented places as diverse as New York City and the villages of East Timor.

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