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•Floating logs at Okobaba

OKOBABA

New Risks for Niger Delta's Timber

THE MOST valuable Renewable Natural Resource of the Niger Delta - forests- which have been under destructive and exploitative spell these past forty years may be lost completely unless something urgent is done locally and globally.

The threat is coming from a renewed attack launched on the TIMBER resource of local communities by loggers, the oil industry, large-scale agro-industrial concerns and individuals. Like all such known attacks, the local people of the Niger Delta are "scarcely aware of the implications", says Nnimmo Bassey, Director, Environmental Rights Action, ERA. The Niger Delta is known to hold the largest forest estate in Nigeria and probably West Africa after forests of the

...ations in the Niger Delta cities of Warri, Port Harcourt and Sapele show that brief-case-carrying timber magnates mostly from Lagos, Cotonou and South East Asia are neck-deep in the business of taking out all valuable timber mostly from that Niger Delta area now taxonomically described by ERA experts as West African Freshwater Equatorial Monsoon Ecozone, FEM.

The magnates collaborate with government agencies including the armed and security forces and corrupt officials of both the Ministries of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Works and Transport. Bush contractors receive gifts of chainsaws and large sums of money from city-based timber magnates in order to facilitate the denudation of forest areas. Individuals in local communities are then hired and given the chainsaws to do the lumbering. No form of training in timber matters are given or required.

When cut down, the timbers are floated out via canals of not more than 1.5 metres wide. The canals are usually dug along seismic lines left by multinational companies. Access to the forest areas in the FEM ecozone have over the years been facilitated by oil industry activities, especially seismic and

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CBS/B/923

Briefing

•FIFTEEN OUT of the19 Ogoni youths being held without trial for the alleged murder of four Ogoni chiefs four years ago have been granted bail by a Port Harcourt High Court.

Mr. Justice Obie Daniel-Kalio gave the order following an application filed on behalf of the detainees by Mr. Bede Onu, a lawyer with Gani Fawehinmi Chambers. Weeks after the order, the relevant authorities are yet to comply with it. The word on the streets is that the judge may have revoked the order in chambers.

But Mr. Batom Mitee, member of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People and younger brother of the acting MOSOP president Mr. Ledum Mitee who was arrested on the eve of this year's Ogoni Day has been released after spending five months in detention (see *NDA*, March, 1998) . He was released on Thursday, May 14 after spending five months in detention without charge or trial , no thanks to the notorious Rivers State Internal Security Force led by Major Obi Umahi. Also released on the same day was his comrade Baridi Legbara who earns his living as a surveyor in Port Harcourt.

Shortly after his release, *NDA* visited Batom Mitee at his K-Dere native home where he gave a vivid picture of the horror that was the ordeal Major Umahi subjected him to. In one case, he was blindfolded with a piece of black cloth and taken to the military barracks known as Bori Camp in Port Harcourt where he was forced to sign several undertakings stating that he would no longer participate in MOSOP and other human rights activities. There is better proof of his account than his tattooed back which were the direct brutalities he underwent in captivity.

Mitee confessed that he was going to start life afresh as he has lost all his valuables, including the originals of his academic certificates to the task force which is reported to have looted his residences in Port Harcourt and K-Dere. He commented that despite his release, he is not free as a result of constant threats.

Beside the torture inside the cell, he also suffered a permanent loss. His mother died of hypertension while the ruling soldiers in criminal alliance with the oil giants put him away for five months, having earlier forced his older brother, the acting MOSOP president into exile.

New Risks for Niger Delta's Timber

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pipeline works. From these canals, the logs travel into the creeks and rivers and finally to the cities of Lagos, Port Harcourt, Hong Kong, Peking and Seoul.

NDA confirmed that an average of 100 logs or 2,400 planks measuring 1x12x12 are floated out of the Niger Delta everyday into Lagos alone.

In the Niger Delta city of Port Harcourt over 6,000 planks measuring 2x12; 4x9; 4x12 and 4x18 inches are received in the waterside communities of Nembe, Bille, Bonny, Timber and Abonnema Wharf, every week.

Also, various high class woods including Mahogany, Cedar, Black Afara, Abura, Okololo, Iroko, Kuru and Elleh are the preferred choice of the timber men who are daily smiling to the banks while the local people of the Niger Delta live in abject poverty and environmental degradation.

NDA visited Okobaba in the Ebute Metta area of Lagos and saw thousands of logs from the Niger Delta floating in pains almost still but for the occasional drag of chains as they are hauled into the mills stationed onshore.

Speaking with *NDA*, the Chairman of the Okobaba Bush Contractors Association, Chief Felix Imole Omowumi confessed that there will be no more timber in ten years time unless something is done urgently.

"There are now no more good timber in Ogun, Ondo and Lagos States. All the timber you see here are from Bayelsa, Rivers and Delta States and they will be finished soon", Omowumi revealed. The chief also drew attention to the destruction now being visited on Abura trees by people out for its leaves. Abura leaves are used mainly in Northern Nigeria. The gatherers, also from the North cut down the young as well as old trees and proceed to pluck all the leaves.

NDA investigations at Okobaba reveal that an average of 24 planks of 1x12x12 can be obtained from a 12 feet log. One single tree could produce between 3-5 logs of wood. With the average price of N350 per plank, dealers could conveniently make N8,400 from one log or N33,000 for a whole tree, containing four logs.

But then, this amount pales into insignificance when compared to what the timber merchants with connections to the markets abroad could make. Inside sources say a tree of any of the hard wood could fetch N2.4 million or even more.

For the local people, they get as little as N600 for any tree they cut. In some communities, a fixed sum of N10,000 is charged. This fee enables the bush contractor to enter into the forest to cut "whatever he likes within a given number of days".

There are real fears that if the present trend continues, timber and non-timber forest products which provide avenues for the sustenance of millions of the inhabitants of the Delta may be lost.

Specifically, when the current groans of saws subsides, the forests will lie denuded of valuable timber and non-timber forest products, including medicine, fruits, leaves, palmwine and spices.

The bio-diversity of the area which together with the forests of the Cross Rivers probably contain 60-80 per cent of all Nigerian plant and animal species could become a thing of the past.

Of wider implications are the effect on hydrological cycles, rainfall patterns, erosion control and off and onshore fish breeding.

Already under severe pressure from the oil industry, the Niger Delta may lose its carrying capacity.

A collapse of the human ecosystems portends grave dangers for Nigeria, West Africa and global security. The wealth from timber as in the case with palm oil and crude oil is the harbinger of poverty for the local people•

Briefing

•EVERY MAY 4, the Amanikpo Society, a socio-cultural organisation in Ogoniland holds their annual festival but since the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others, the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force, RSISTF, banned any activity in the land which will attract crowd.

Three years after, the group contacted the Divisional Police headquarters at Kpor and Mr. Livinus Kiebel, chairman of Gokana Local Government, Ogoni, for permission to perform their annual activity and permission was given.

First, it was the turn of Bodo City people also of Gokana Council to do theirs, but the day turned out to be sour.

At 6 pm when the peaceful activity of drum-beating and singing songs was about to start, three trucks loaded with soldiers of RSISTF armed to the teeth with sophisticated weapon stormed the place and started firing gunshots indiscriminately, dispersing onlookers and members of the group.

Several others like one Kenneth Pronen, a student, suffered gunshot wounds while the following were arrested: Cletus Pronen, 42, businessman and Michael Keredei, 58, community chief and scores of others are still held incommunicado at a cell in Kpor.

•**THE RURAL** Environmental Action, REACT, is now at the quiz and debate phase for secondary schools. REACT is a project for ERA aimed at creating environmental awareness in the rural areas, thereby empowering the rural people to tackle environment al problemswith specific emphasis on local rain forest.

Already, environment awareness fora have been held in five communities where REACT cells or environmental committees were set up by these communities to understudy and find solutions to their environmental prolems.

BISENI/OHIALI-ELU

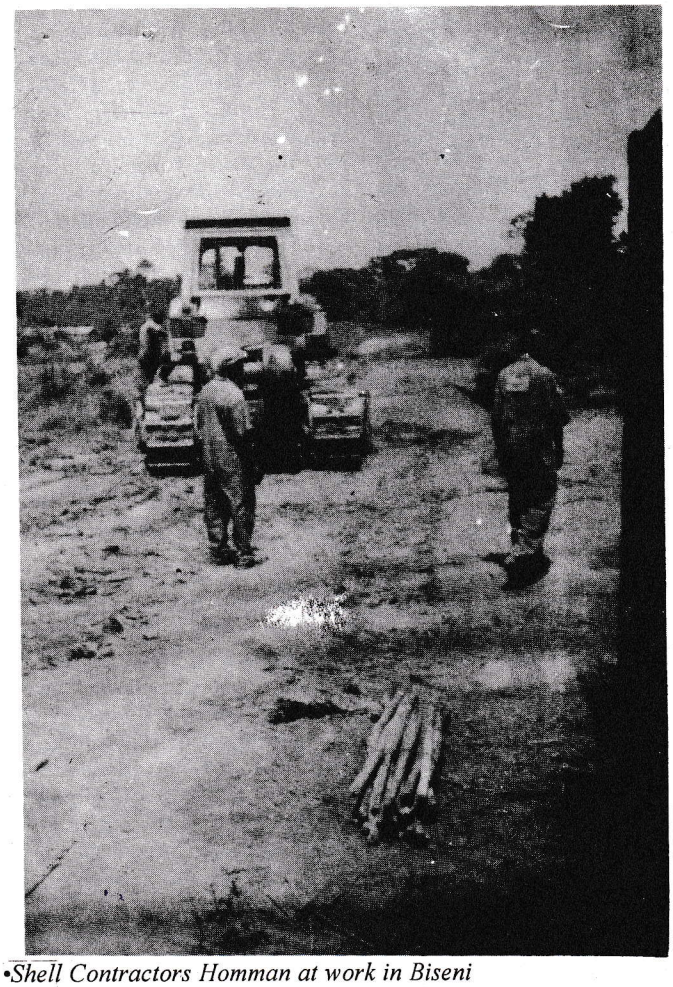
Shell Descrates Cemetary, Commits Sacrilege

FOUR MONTHS after *NDA* alerted the world about several uncleaned oil spills in Biseni, Yenagoa Local Government Council of Bayelsa State (see *NDA*, January, 1998), they remain abandoned by Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC - uncleaned. If anything, the burden of the oil-bearing community continue to mount daily.

In the name of constructing a ring road to link up all the eight villages that make up the community and an access route to their facilities, Shell contracted Homman Engineering early this year. The contractors started work almost immediately - but with total disregard for tradition and decency. In the course of construction, they excavated the contents of a cemetery at Egbebiri community and deposited most of its remains into Taylor Creek to form a bridge across it, thus completely blocking the free flow of water. The creek which serves as the main source of drinking water for the people has been polluted with corpses and bones of the dead.

The paramount ruler of Akpede community Chief Benedict Pawei who also suffered the indignity of having his mother's bones dug out by the SPDC contractors told *NDA* in tears that he identified his mother's corpse from the wrapper used in burying her. Eze Biowei, cousin to the chief who was one of those that picked the bones of the dead woman for reburial said the skull which was not found may have been carried along to form the blockade at Taylor creek. The chief lamented the arrogance of the contractors who offered to pay him a paltry three thousand naira for its sacrilege when he complained.

Also complaining are the people of Edagberi-Engenni, Ahoada-West Local Government Council of Rivers State who are neighbours to the Biseni. Deputy Chief of the community, Jeremiah Onuje revealed that an oil spillage at Egberi bush last December has yet to be cleaned by Shell despite the harm it has done to fish ponds and the vegetation of the area.



•*Shell Contractors Homman at work in Biseni*

Onuje whose community is also impacted following the blockade on Taylor creek warned that if it is not opened to allow for normal flow, there would be abnormal flooding with the rains.

The same sad story of desecrating corpses is the lot of the people of Ohiali-Elu community in Ogba/ Egbema/ Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State.

For two days, April 14 and 15, just after this year's Easter festivities, bulldozers belonging to the Italian oil services company SAIPEM who are pipeline contractors for the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas project which has Shell as the managing partner descended on the sacred cemeteries of Ohiali-Elu while constructing pipelines for the NLNG transport networt, leaving in their trails tales of anguish. Sacred burial grounds were unearthed, caskets and were over-turned, making corpses to literally walk.

Said Brother Victor Osiagor of the Umu-Akasi family who saw it all: "When they (Saipem) started digging and reached that place (cemetery), they dug out broken caskets, bones, towels, slippers, snuff containers, skulls, etc...The expatriate (supervisor) was angry with the local people that they did not hide and bury the discovered items. We did stop them and they passed through the cemetery." He added that the company, constantly threatens members of the community in the name of the Federal Military Government, saying at least five skulls were recovered after the incident.

Chief Bannetti Eke of Umu Okendia family in Ohiali-Elu says the most annoying thing is that Saipem has not paid any compensation for the land.

"Not until they dug out skeletons, skulls and fresh bodies with clothes still on were they shocked. Now they know, but have refused to pay money for reburial and other rituals needed."

Added the chief: "Our custom forbids digging out corpses without immediate reburial. You are disturbing the rest of our ancestors by digging them out of their houses."

Chairman of the Ohiali-Elu Community Development Committee told NDA that what Sapiem did was an intentional act. We told them but they didn't listen.

Now, there is pollution in the land causing a lot of hazards and affecting the whole community. We are asking for adequate compensation and for necessary rituals to be done."

Meanwhile in Biseni, the travails of the people in the hands of unfeeling multinational oil companies is not about to end as Nigeria Agip Oil Company, NAOC, has started flaring gas at its Idu 1 location, a few metres away from the community.

This has resulted in increased health problems which is noticeable in the increased number of patients that besiege the ill-equipped community health centre, daily.

The Health Officer at the Health Centre, D.O. Jeremiah confirmed to NDA that there has been a high incidence of whooping cough, measles, itching, redness of eyes, headache and conjuctivis in the recent times•

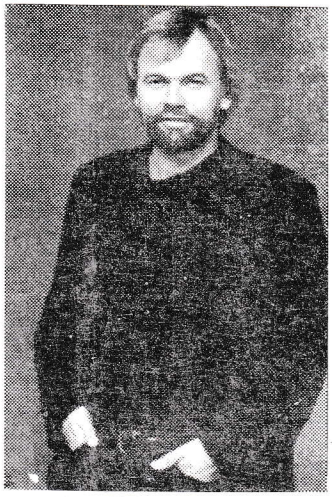
BENIN

ERA Wins the Sophie Prize 1998

THE NIGERIAN advocacy NGO Environmental Rights Action, ERA has made history as the premier winner of a new global prize in the field of environment and development.

THE SOPHIE PRIZE 1998 which goes with a sum of US$100,000 estimated at over eight million naira is administered by the Sophie Foundation based in Oslo, Norway. Established last November, the foundation is the brainchild of the Norwegian philosopher and author Mr. Jostein Gaarder whose book *SOPHIE'S WORLD* has sold more than 15 million copies and translated into 45 languages. Gaarder donated a large chunk of the fortune earned from the sale of his books, especially *SOPHIE'S WORLD* to establish the foundation which exists to award an annual international prize of $100,000 in environment and development to one or several individuals, or to an organisation nominated by a third party. ERA was nominated by Friends of the Earth, Norway (Norges Naturvernforbund).

The Director of the Sophie Foundation, Mr. Anette Langtvet broke the news of the award in the last week of May in an electronic mail to ERA Director, Mr. Nnimmo Bassey.



•*Gaarder*

A pleasantly surprised Bassey described the award as a vindication of the fact that ERA has been on the right path in its campaign for the protection of the human ecosystems. "That the Sophie Foundation was initiated by a writer and the first ever award coming to a group in Nigeria underscores the viciousness of our environment which is notorious for killing our writers, detaining and imprisoning some and hounding others into exile", commented Bassey, himself a published poet. "This award will encourage us to do more for our people and for our environment"

To win the award, ERA beat several organisations and individuals around the world, including Lester Brown (Founder and Director of the World Watch Institute) and Thomas Xavier Kocherry (Founder of several local and national fish organisations in India, and in 1997 the World Forum of Fishharvesters and Fishworkers) who were among the finalists.

The prize will be formally presented to ERA at a grand ceremony in Oslo, Norway on June 15. Deputy Director of ERA, Mr. Oronto Douglas explained that the prize money would be used to strengthen the organisation; commence work on the ERA Environmental Centre and promote environmental awareness, especially in the local communities.

ERA was inaugurated five years ago initially as a project of the Nigerian Civil Liberties Organisation to monitor environmental rights in the country. It is an affiliate of Friends of the Earth International based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands . It also hosts the Africa Regional Secretariat of Oilwatch International with headquarters in Quito, Ecuador. The organisation is currently concerned with exposing the environmental and human rights atrocities of the multinational oil companies, especially Royal-Dutch Shell in the ecologically threatened Niger Delta.

ERA had previously campaigned against: the European Union over its Risonpalm Project which had proposed to cut down 78,000 hectares of forest in the central Niger Delta; Mechelin and Wempco over their unsustainable practice of cutting down forests in Western Nigeria; the Federal and Edo State governments over their pollution of Ugba River in Benin. The NGO was also in the vanguard of the opposition to the building of the Kafin-Zaki dam by the Federal government in Yobe State, Northern Nigeria, without an Environmental Impact Assessment, EIA•

LAGOS

...Staff Detained

THE NIGERIA Police has arrested a staff of the Environmental Rights Action (Friends of the Earth, Nigeria) and a Lagos-based human rights lawyer.

Mr. Isaac Osuoka, Project Officer(Networking) who is currently on secondment to the Oilwatch Africa Regional Secretariat as Programmes Co-ordinator was arrested in Lagos on Tuesday, May 26 around 11.00 p.m. while driving in a taxi with Mr. Aart van den Hoek, a Dutch who is the co-ordinator of Oilwatch Europe. Both men were taken to Surulere Police Station and detained Hoek was released the next morning and the police are accusing Osuoka of being in possession several copies of *NIGER DELTA ALERT* as well as anti-Abacha posters produced by the opposition Democratic Alternative. The police described both materials as "subversive". Osuoka is based in Port Harcourt but was in Lagos to attend the recent meeting of the African Forest Action Network, AFAN.

A lawyer whom ERA contacted to secure a bail for Osuoka has also been arrested. Mr. Bamidele Aturu who works with Itse Sagay & Co was taken into police custody on Friday, May 29 at the Surulere Police Station where he had gone to discuss the release of his client with the police.

The Divisional Police Officer of the Surulere Police Station overzealously accused the lawyer of hiding behind his professional identity to indulge in anti-Abacha activities. Aturu and Osuoka were thereafter transferred to the office of the Lagos State Police Commissioner where the DPO lied that both men were caught pasting posters against the transformation of the military ruler General Sani Abacha into a civilian president this October. From the commissioner's office, they were taken to the 'Area F' Division of the Lagos State Police Command where they are currently being held in an overcrowded cell without sanitary facilities and the inmates include common criminals.

ERA has expressed serious worries about the detainees. "If the police believe Osuoka and Aturu have contravened the laws of the land, the sensible thing to do is to charge them to a democratic court of law, not to deny them their rights as human persons", the group noted in a press statement•

NIGER DELTA ALERT

NIGER DELTA ALERT is the bulletin of the Delta Information Service Project of the Environmental Rights Action, Nigeria. It is produced by the organisation's staff and field monitors with contributions from volunteers.

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