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OBELLE

Shell is for Death

WILL SHELL Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Limited ever change its ways? A gas fire is burning now in a major expanse of farmland at Obelle community in Emohua local government council of Rivers State. Shell came to that community in 1963, 35 years ago, and it currently operates one flow station and six oil wells.

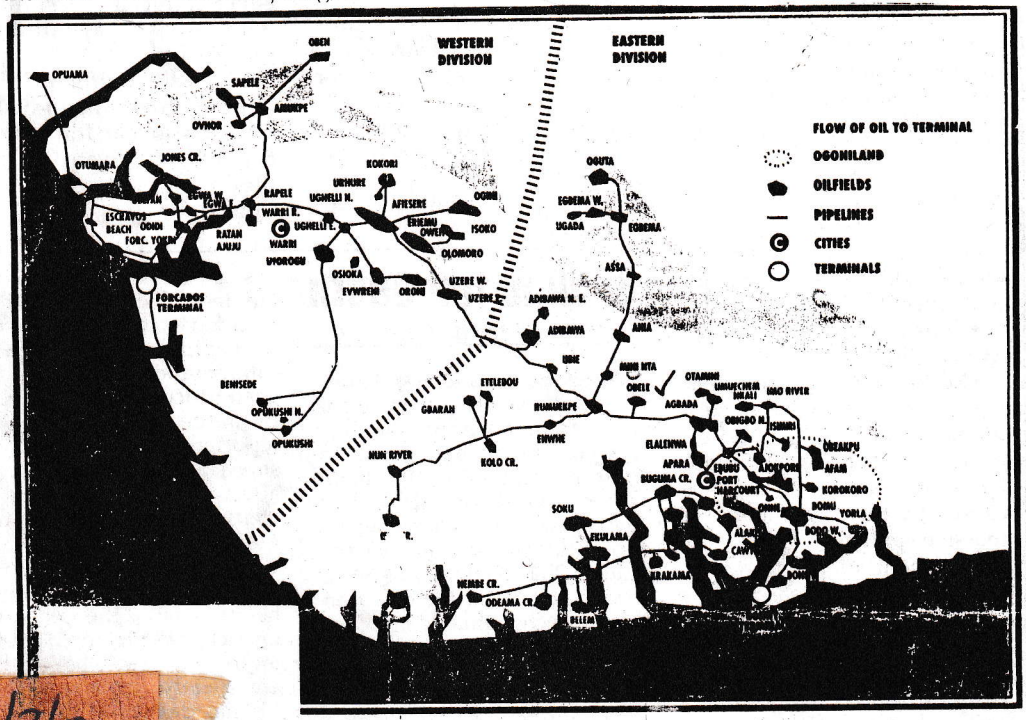
Uzor Omieba, the site of the gas fire, is about 200 metres away from the Shell flow station and it is in the middle of two oil wells, location 4 and 6 owned by the multinational oil company. Seismic lines, oil pipelines and pits also dot the area of the incident.

Yet, Shell has continued to deny responsibility for this gas fire raging in Obelle since January 30. The company has ruled out compensation for the owners of the land and set its spin-doctors to work. Their case is that the fire is "mysterious" and has nothing to do with their operations in the area. One Rudd De-joung, a shell technical staff; Mr. Victor Dania, its External Relations Manager and Mr. Bobo Brown, Head of Public Affairs are arguing this case with all the force at their command.

But what really is the case? On a recent visit to Obelle, *NDA* reporters learnt that a middle-aged farmer, Mrs. Dorothy Welekwe, had gone to her farm to uproot cassava last January 30 when she saw a little candle light coming out from the ground. She could not immediately understand what was going on. That evening, she went to elders of the Omualaa and Omuamadi group of families of Omuiba-Obelle to report what she had seen. The elders themselves were alarmed at what they had heard. The following morning, they detailed a family delegation to the area only to discover that the whole place been enveloped by gas flames. It produced no smokes but it pushed dangerous substances into their lungs. Shell was alerted. The company came with its fire-fighting equipment but it was more out of fear that the fire may spread to their nearby facilities than concern for the host community. They used foam spray. It was to no avail. It then occurred to Shell that the gas leak could be coming from their oil wells and flow stations. For two days, production was stopped at the Obelle onshore oil field. Again, the fire would not stop. And Shell continued production without any scruples for the over 20,000 villagers whose life was at stake. About the same time, the company requested the owners of the land to supply them with six persons to guard the place in shifts. The persons were hired by Shell as casual workers.

Worried that the multinational oil company, MNOC, was not willing to do anything, the landlords on February 6 invited the state government to intervene. By Monday, March 3, the Rivers State military administrator, Colonel Musa Shehu,

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map

Source: World Council of Churches, 1996

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CBS/3/92

Briefing

•Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited has come under fresh attacks by the Delta Oil Producing Communities Association and the Delta State government over its new year spillage which started at its off-shore Idoho Production Platform in Ibeno, Akwa Ibom state.

DOPCA which is made up of 64 oil communities, comprising Ijaws, Urhobos, Itsekiris, Urhobos and Isokos in Delta State called on Mobil to expedite action on the question of compensation as the spill has caused them untold hardship.

"We are greatly concerned and worried about the current Mobil oil spill which is causing ecological damage along the sea shores, affecting marine and aquatic life in the affected riverine communities," chairman of DOPCA, Chief Gana Manuwa remarked recently.

On his part, the military administrator of Delta State, Colonel John Dungs flayed the multinational oil company, MNOC, over its mopping up operation, noting that the exercise lamentably failed to meet internationally accepted standards. The administrator who spoke at the end of an inspection visit to affected communities observed that recent findings by environmental experts commissioned by the state have shown that MNOCs operating in Nigeria have total disdain for globally recognised standards of oil exploration and production.

Sources said a special committee established by the state under the headship of the commissioner for Agriculture and Natural Resources, Mr. Gerry Oseni visited sites of the spill under the guidance of Shell Petroleum Development Company (Nigeria) Ltd., SPDC, which is doing the clean-up exercise in the state on behalf of Mobil. The team found out that the clearing gear employed by the workers to clean up the spill was below standards, leading to rashes, skin burns and other related diseases. It was also established that the crude oil recovered was not well disposed, resulting in great harm to aquatic life.

OLUGBOBIRI

Angry Youths Battle Agip in Bayelsa

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8 was a bad day for Nigerian Agip Oil Company Limited as aggrieved youths from four communities in Southern Ijaw local government council of Bayelsa State made good a threat issued earlier to stop operations of the multinational oil commpany at its Tebidaba oil fields flow station. The youths numbering over 300 from Olugbobiri, Olugbo-Oboro, Ekebiri 1 and Ekebiri 2 invaded the flow station which is located along the Sangana River, a boundary between Olugbobiri and Koluama in the early hours of that day. They sacked all the NAOC personnel on site, including expatriates and arrested five men of the Nigerian army who they brought to the town. The youths also seized three sea trucks and one tug boat belonging to the oil company. After sacking the station, 60 youths were detailed to provide security in turns and the NAOC personnel who were later released on the same day were warned sternly not to come near the flow station until the management of NAOC meet their demands. These demands bother on infrastructural development in the community. Specifically, the demands include:

•Employment of Olugbobiri and Olugbo-Oboro indigenes in NAOC and the training of her sons and daughters at the Petroleum Training Institute.

•Direct installation of power supply from Olugbobiri oil fields flow station to Olugbo-Oboro and Olugbobiri.

•Building of classrooms in the community.

•Provision of potable water in Olugbobiri and Olugbo-Oboro

•Payment of youth development levy of one million naira ($12,000) per annum to the youths of Olugbobiri and Olugbo-Oboro community with effect from 1973

•Construction of a concrete jetty at Olugbo-Oboro

•Rehabilitation of the floating jetty at the Olugbobiri community

•Payment of one billion dollar compensation for damages caused by the November 1996 massive spillage.

•Payment of N500 million ($6 million) compensation to Olugbobiri and Olugbo-Oboro for two major spillage cases pending at the High Court.

•Sand-filling, embarkment and shore protection of Olugbobiri and Olugbo-Oboro communities.

The Tebidaba oil fields flow station is a transit pumping station for all other upstream stations operated by Agip and it is linked to the Brass terminal. Expectedly, the MNOC has been uneasy with this development. Efforts at negotiating with the community were yet to produce results at press time. Even the intervention of the Bayelsa State Commissioner for Justice, Miss Tamapre Yekwe, has failed to produce the desired results.

President of the Olugbobiri Youth Movement, Mr. David Lyon, says after several complaints in the past, Agip's day of reckoning in the community has come. He insists that until all their demands are met, operations would not be allowed to resume. Chairman of Olugbobiri community, Mr. Aaron Collins, explains that following a demonstration in April 1991 which led to the blocking of the flow station, the Rivers State government from which Bayelsa was created brokered an agreement between Agip and the community.

The agreement was signed by Chief N.K. Lazarus and Chief N.S. Orianzi for Olugbobiri and Chief O.D. Oboo, chairman of Yenagoa local government where the community was then located for the government and Mr. V.E. Awani for NAOC.

The agreement centred on the provision of basic amenities for the community by 1992. But NAOC kept this agreement in the breach. The defence of the company is that the 1991 agreement was signed under duress.

Agip's Head of Public Relations, Mr. Akin Aruwajobe says irate youths captured Mr. Awani and forced him into the contract. Support for the demands of the Olugbobiri people has come from various Nigerian environmental and minority right groups, including the Environmental Rights Action; Movement for the Survival of Izon Ethnic Nationality; Oil Watch; Watch the Niger Delta; the Ijaw National Congress and the Chikoko Movement.

Olugbobiri, which is about two and half hours drive by speed boat from Yenagoa, capital of Bayelsa State has a population of about 25,000 people. They are mainly farmers and fishermen. For 28 years, Agip has been operating in Olugbobiri. In fact, about 40,000 barrels of crude oil are produced daily at the Tebidaba oil field flow station. Like other communities across the delta, they have had several cases of negligence-induced spillages which Agip always attributes to sabotage.

NAOC is controlled by the Italian government-owned Ente Nazionale Idrocarbum, ENI and a private US firm Phillips Petroleum Company•

Shell is for Death

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visited the site and asked Shell to behave itself by fencing the place and ensuring that the people are treated justly. A speech prepared by the landlords to be delivered on their behalf by the chairman of Emohua local government, Chief Ohaka Ehem was however not read at the occasion. The speech, obtained by *NDA*, narrates the sad story of a people marked for death by Shell (see box on page 3).

Although, *Uzor Omueba* is about one kilometre away from residential homes, the gas fire has started to have a telling impact on the community. Early visitors to the scene are complaining of cough and catarrh and itching. In fact, gas-induced tears came out from the eyes of two *NDA* reporters while inspecting the site. Their eyes started itching afterwards. The reporters also observed two guards on duty, Messrs. Chinedu John a.k.a. *Congo* and Mbadiwe Dimkpa itching seriously. Beside the health risk, the economic impact of the incident is enormous. For one, Obelle people are mainly farmers and the fire has destroyed their yams, cassava, vegetables, palm

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'Before We Perish'

Excerpts of an undelivered address by the families of Omualaa/Omuamadi during the visit of the Rivers State military administrator to the scene of the Gas Fire on March 2.

Your excellency sir, permit me to inform you that where we are presently standing and the entire area in fire lies between location 4 and 6 owned by SHELL. If you also look around you will find seismic lines and pits and oil pipelines also owned by the same company. It therefore beats our imagination and in fact sounds inciting and provocative to hear from the officials of SHELL Petroleum Company (Nigeria) Limited that they are not responsible for our present predicament.

Like we earlier informed his excellency in our "Save our Souls" letter dated 6th February, 1998, this fire had destroyed several hectares of farmland, our ancestral shrines, agricultural products, economic trees etc. It has also completely rendered the soil useless. Sir, you could imagine and impact of this type of unprecedented situation to a community whose only means of livelihood is farming. Presently thousands of the affected families who use the farm land as the only source of income for the training and maintenance of their families are refugees in their land.

It is also pertinent to inform his excellency that even the areas that are not presently on fire are highly inflammable as there are gas emissions all over waiting for the slightest spark. This has also affected our plants and crops both those harvested and those yet to be harvested. The worst part of it all is that from our observations any attempt to go into any traditional farming activities may spell doom and total destruction of the lives and properties of the entire people of Obelle as the gas fire might even burn to living homes.

We have also been warned to keep-off the area by SHELL officials for fear of serious health hazards. With all these sanctions and cautions, our questions now are where do we go from here? Do we fold our hands and die of hunger? Where do we run to as refugees even when there is no war? Or what is the possibility of thousands of the affected families becoming beggars on the streets?

Presently we are in fears of total extinction because for now the solution to the problem is not yet in sight particularly as the fire is still burning with impunity. The possible resultant effect of this might be earthquake, explosion or a very serious health hazard to the people. Before this entire race will perish as a result of oil exploration and exploitation in the area, we strongly pray his excellency to direct the appropriate authorities to as a matter of urgency ensure that the fire is put out. This would reduce the level of panic, anxiety, rumpus and fear already gripping the people of this community.

We also humbly and most respectfully wish to appeal to his excellency to prevail on SHELL to stop the present politicisation of the issue and the media propaganda being mounted to give the impression that all is well with the community. The implication of this is that SHELL does not have the welfare and interest of its host community at heart.

SIGNED

•Chief Cletus Amadi
Head, Omuamadi Group of Families
•Elder Jonathan Welekwe
Head, Omualla Group of Families
•Mr A.S. Ohaka
Secretary, Omuala/Omuamadi Group of Families

Briefing

Meanwhile, the state branch of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), has petitioned the government over the health hazards facing the people following the spillage.

Latest reports indicate that the spill has reached Ramos Line, the route between Ughelli quality control centre and the Forcados Terminal where crude oil is exported.

•Dr. Raphael Adewoye, chemist administrator and until his appointment, a permanent secretary at the Federal Code of Conduct Bureau has replaced Dr. Adegoke Adegoroye as Director of the Nigerian Federal Environmental Protection Agency, FEPA. The agency was established ten years ago to care for the country's bio-diversity and the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

•An Environmental Rights Action's field officer and grassroots campaigner has been ejected from his home accommodation in Port-Harcourt for his human and environmental rights activism.

Mr. Felix Tuodolor was ejected this February 13. Chief P.E. Olisa, owner of the house effected the ejection, saying it was as a result of the continuous harassment from men of the SSS being suffered by all residents of the compound.

According to the Chief, the harassments are as a result of Tuodolor's "anti-government stance on a number of issues."•

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trees, etc. Mr. Ohaka Ambrose, spokesman of Omuiba-Obelle, estimates the total land affected to be 300 square metres. Shell contests this figure, saying it is 150 square metres. According to Ohaka, over 500 people have been directly deprived of their major sources of livelihood, following the incident. He put the cost of the damage suffered at N1 billion ($12 million). The spokesman demanded that Shell should put an immediate end to the fire, pay compensation to the landlords and provide an alternative farmland for them as *Uzor Omieba* has been poisoned. Villagers fear that with the fire, famine is imminent. But that is not one of Shell's concerns.

Like in its operations elsewhere in the Niger Delta, all that matters to Shell in Obelle is profit. After 35 years in the community, there is no sign that Shell wants the people to enjoy basic amenities. After a demonstration lasting about 10 days in 1996, Shell managed to build a Trunk C road in Obelle.

Again, this was no philanthropy as the road was to facilitate their operations. A five-year-old demand by the community for potable water remains unanswered. Six years ago, the MNOC was said to have donated about 500 classroom desk to Community Secondary School, Obelle and last year it allegedly built a yet-to-be-commissioned six-classroom blocks for the same school.

All the portents suggest that the oil company does not even have a geological history of the area despite the billions of dollars it has made from the Obelle oil field.

Shell's spokesman, Bobo Brown, has told the villagers that the gas fire and emission are not toxic. This is self-serving propaganda as even elementary school pupils know that once air is polluted, it is no longer safe. His counterpart, Victor Dania has claimed that the incident may have resulted from bush burning which ignited a shallow gas. "Once such fire is ignited, until the gas is exhausted, it would not stop. Shallow gas is a natural phenomenon which should not be linked to our operations," he remarked recently.

After subjecting an area to intense oil exploration and production activities for 35 years, it is amusing for Shell to talk about a natural disaster on an area close to its location. Or is there no limit to the antics of spin-doctors?•

ANNOUNCEMENT

•Delta Information Service is not an *organisation*. It is a *project* of the Nigerian advocacy NGO, Environmental Rights Action. ERA is committed to the defence of human ecosystems within the context of human rights and the promotion of environmentally responsible practices by governments, corporations and the people. ERA is a member of the African Forest Action Network, AFAN, as well as an associate member of Friends of the Earth International, FE. It is also the co-ordinating NGO of the Oil Watch Network in Africa.

DIS, as a Delta-specific project of ERA, is designed to:

•Strengthen the work of journalists and environmental and human rights organisations in the oil-producing communities and Nigerians in general working to protect the ecologically-threatened Niger Delta – its mangrove and rainforests, farmlands and fishing waters by feeding them with news and background information as they develop in the area;

•Furnish the local communities with news of the activities of the oil companies and government gencies to the extent that these impact on their daily lives, thereby equiping them with information to take adequate steps to protect their forests, farmlands, fishing streams, e.tc

•Facilitate the international policy-making and lobbying process aimed at returning the Niger Delta to sustained development by providing an alternative framework through which factual information can be gathered within the local communities and disseminated to individuals, environmental organisatioins and sundry multilateral agencies abroad working to realise this objectives;

• Draw international attention to the importance of the bio-diversity of the Niger Delta and the strategic importance of the area to regional and global climatic stability.

Dis's core activity is the publication of the monthly bulletin, *Niger Delta Alert*. DIS welcomes support for its work from sensitive citizens of the world and organisations who believe in the objectives of the project•

ONELGA

13 Communities Sue NLNG Over Compensation

FOR REFUSING to pay them their rightful compensation for the gas pipelines the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Company is laying across their lands, 13 communities in Rivers State have sued the company to court in two separate suits.

In the suits filed at a High Court in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, the plaintiffs deposed that they were consciously excluded in a surface right payment exercise conducted on behalf of the NLNG by a firm of chartered accountants, Price Warehouse between May and August last year. They are therefore seeking an order forcing NLNG to make available for inspection the actual amount the company wants to pay them so that there will be mutual trust before payment is made and laying of pipes can continue.

Specifically, the 13 communities in Ogba, Ndoni, Egbema local government council, ONELGA, namely: Omoku, Obagi, Obrikor, Egbogoro, Obigbor, Ohali-Elu, Osumni, Akabuka, Kregani, Obite, Aligu, Ogbogo and Okposi are demanding N3.5 billion ($42 million) as their due.

Last January 20, the presiding judge, Justice E.N.T. Ebete granted an *ex-parte* motion filed by the plaintiffs to restrain NLNG from going on with the laying of gas pipelines on their lands, pending the determination of the substantive suit. The defendants filed a counter affidavit seeking the court's order to dismiss or strike out the suit for lack of jurisdiction, or in the alternative lift the interim injunction issued in favour of the plaintiffs. The defendants submitted that it is not correct to say that they have refused to pay compensation or show the plaintiffs the figures to be paid them. According to NLNG, genuine claimants will be paid when investigations have been concluded concerning both the authenticity of survey plans submitted by the plaintiffs and the claims of omissions. The NLNG is being represented in the suit by Mr. V.N. Ihua-Madueyi.

On March 3, Justice Ebete lifted the perpetual injunction granted the plaintiffs when told by the NLNG that they would want to settle the matter out of court with the aggrieved communities. He adjourned hearing to March 5 but warned that the court would restore the restraint on NLNG if they refuse to settle the matter amicably with the communities.

Counsel to the plaintiffs, Mr. Ngozi Imegi however pointed out that negotiations between his clients and NLNG may have hit a dead end as the company has refused to adhere to the agreed principle of settlement•

OSUBI

Soldiers Deployed to Shell's Airport

TWENTY ARMED soldiers have been deployed to Osubi, a community in Okpe local government council of Delta State where Shell Petroleum Development Company is constructing a $42 million airport project.

The soldiers were deployed there following series of protests by the community over the manner their land was acquired by Shell for the project which started about two years ago. The multinational oil company had relied on the obnoxious Land Use Decree of 1978 which places all land in Nigeria in the clenched fists of the controllers of the state power to appropriate the Osubi people's land.

Work at the site is being handled by Julius Berger, a German construction company which recently rebuilt the parade ground in Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory, for the alleged two million than March in support of the transformation of the ruling general into a civilian president.

The 20 men providing military shield for the construction of the airport are from the David Ejoor Barracks at Warri, Delta State. Their brief is to put down any dissent from the aggrieved people of Osubi who are worried over the violation of their economic, social and cultural rights. Soldiers from this same barracks were used to sack the Ijaw community of Ekeremor-Zion in Delta last September because that community challenged Shell's continued threats over them•

•*Watch out for a fuller report from ERA.*

NIGER DELTA ALERT

NIGER DELTA ALERT is published by Delta Information Service, a project of the Environmental Rights Action.

The bulletin exists to bring you environmental news and information on key economic and political developments in the Niger Delta and the campaigns of ERA and other groups working in the area. It is published in the last week of every month, beginning January 1998. *NDA* is distributed via e-mail and in hard copy to interested individuals and organisations. For inquiries and inclusion in our mailing list, kindly contact:

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