

CRISIS IN THE NIGER DELTA OF NIGERIA

By Mr Inemo Samiama

I wish to draw the attention of the media to the crisis in the Niger delta of Nigeria. The cruel abuse, exploitation and oppression of the people from the Niger Delta by the Nigerian authorities and the oil Companies operating there has been perpetuated for over 40 years.

The Niger Delta has approximately 75,000 sq km of sedimentary basin fill, over 12km thick at its central location. The estimate of recoverable oil is about 22.5 billion barrels of oil. Nigeria produces about 2-3 million barrels a day. A total of 57 multinational and private Nigerian companies have been licensed to explore and produce oil in the region.

Nigeria, the world's eight biggest crude exporter, has frequently suffered unrest in its oil rich Niger Delta region; there have been many atrocities and genocidal acts that have been committed by the Nigerian authorities over the years. The people of the Niger delta in Nigeria are one of the worst abused, exploited and wantonly killed group of peoples in the whole of Africa today.

Human Rights watch says foreign governments have remained conspicuously silent on the issues affecting the Niger Delta. It singles out the United States and Britain, the two countries with the strongest economic and political leverage on Nigeria - for failing to speak out publicly.

It also suggests that these countries regard Nigeria as a critical strategic partner in Africa with whom it is important to preserve close diplomatic relations. So the unrest and killings continues.

Oil exports from Nigeria began in the 1950's, and now account for about 90% of the foreign exchange earnings, and 80% of the federal government revenue. Over 90% of these come from the Niger Delta. Yet, the Ijaws and all the other tribes from the Niger Delta live in abject poverty and in inhuman conditions, with no portable water, no hospitals and clinics, sewage system and tarred roads. Moreover, their farmlands, rivers, streams and creeks are being polluted, causing unimaginable illnesses.

A report by the international organisation, friends of the earth which was published in the Financial times Newspaper recently wrote and I quote "The Gas flaring in the Niger delta causes more greenhouse gases than all of sub-Saharan Africa combined. The giant orange flares that burn across the delta region, where most of Nigeria's Oil is produced, causes respiratory diseases and

premature deaths, and pollute crop lands close to village homes in the Delta's vast network of swamps and creeks."

Other problems include resource control, the oil spillages, devastation of our environment, lack of development, army and police brutality and many more. Over the years, there has been an on-going struggle by the people for a better deal, a fair share of the huge wealth generated in their land.

Much of Nigeria's Hausa dominated north has been under Islamic law "Sharia" since 2000. Meanwhile a popular ethnic leader from the oil-producing Niger delta who called for the disintegration of Nigeria has been arrested and charged with treasonable felony, carrying a penalty of life imprisonment. He is still languishing in jail. His arrest, 10 years after Nigeria's military junta hung Ken Saro-Wiwa, a prominent activist has reverberated through out the turbulent Niger Delta.

The fact is that the people of the Niger Delta are an oppressed and exploited people, and all citizens of the Niger delta know it. There are roadblocks, army and police patrols in various parts of the Niger Delta. There are beatings, raping and killings happening now in our homeland.

Today, the rising cost of the world's oil is also being blamed on the unrest in Niger Delta. The western governments are beginning to take notice of the troubles and unrest that have been going on in the Niger Delta for so long. The Delta's people have seen little benefit from their natural wealth. We have suffered since oil was found in the Niger Delta. We are paying a very high price. Instead of oil being a benefit, it has become a problem.

This is a crisis that is caused by serious injustice. So the American approach of signing defence agreements with the Nigerian military and deploying military Personnel and instructors in the Niger Delta are wrong. We know that the aim is to protect the American oil supplies, but it is still wrong because we are not terrorists and jihadists. We have committed no crimes against the American people. It is wrong to militarily occupy, control, abuse and terrorise a population in order to exploit the resources in their land.

The solution is not to militarise the area. The solution is to listen to and answer the grievances of the people. We are saying that only a better deal based on equity, fairness and justice could assuage the people of the Niger Delta for the long years of neglect and environmental degradation from oil and gas related activities.

Now is the time for the United Nations to get involved. Now is the time for the international Conferences, to try and correct some of the wrongs that have been done to the people of the Niger delta by the Nigerian state and the oil multinationals. Yes, we need some solutions for redressing the criminal neglect and the expropriation and destruction of the resources from the area.

The Niger Delta remains one of the poorest and most volatile places on earth. For as long as this persists, the world oil prices will be affected by events from the Niger Delta.

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