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NIGERIA'S "DRILLING FIELDS"
SHELL OIL'S ROLE IN REPRESSION

By Steve Kretzmann

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In the early hours of Sunday, May 22, 1994, the Nigerian military and police dragged Kenule Saro-Wiwa, author and campaigner for human and environmental rights, from his bed. Saro-Wiwa knew it was coming. He had been arrested at least a half dozen times before, but this time was clearly going to be different. Eight months later, he is still being held without formal charge, and is under the threat of execution.

"This is it," said Saro-Wiwa 12 days before he was arrested. "They [the military] are going to arrest us all and execute us. All for Shell."

In his hands, Saro-Wiwa held a copy of a memo written by the Nigerian Rivers State Commissioner of Police, entitled "Operation Order No. 4/94 - Restoration of Law and Order in Ogoni Land." The order detailed an imminent, extensive military operation that involved members of the Nigerian Army, Air Force, Navy and police. One of the stated purposes of Order 4/94 was to "ensure that ordinary law abiding citizens of the area, non-indigenes resident [sic] carrying out business ventures or schooling within Ogoni land are not molested."

"The drafting of such a large force into the small Ogoni area [404 square miles] is meant to intimidate and terrorize the Ogoni people in order to allow Shell to recommence its operations in the area without carrying out the environmental, health, and social impact studies which the Ogoni people have demanded since 1992," said Saro-Wiwa. Two weeks later, Saro-Wiwa was arrested. Although he has been accused of inciting and directing his supporters to violence, he has never been formally charged. Amnesty International has declared Saro-Wiwa a prisoner of conscience and believes that his arrest is "part of the continuing suppression by the Nigerian authorities of the Ogoni people's campaign against the oil companies."

Saro-Wiwa is the leader and spokesperson for the

Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). Since early 1992, MOSOP has campaigned against what it calls Shell's "environmental terrorism" of the Ogoni homeland in southeastern Nigeria. Today, more than a half a year after Order 4/94 went into effect, Ogoni is under military rule and the leaders of MOSOP are either in detention or hiding. Their campaign has attracted support from around the world.

Ogoni is a tiny place, but the forces at play there have made it a symbol for all of Nigeria. Oil is at the center of the Nigerian economy and stands behind the succession of military regimes that have ruled Nigeria in recent years. Of the oil companies operating in Nigeria, Shell is by far the most powerful and the most despised.

The Ogoni maintain that Shell has funded and directed much of the repeated violence against their villages. "Human life does not mean much to those who have benefited from the oil," Saro-Wiwa says.

Shell maintains that its role is a purely commercial, "non-political" one. Eric Nickson, head of public affairs for Shell International in London, says the Ogoni complaints stem from the political frustrations of a small, marginalized ethnic minority that is conducting an international campaign against Shell as a means to promote two goals: political self-determination and a greater share of oil revenues.

At a minimum, critics say Shell is providing valuable foreign capital to a repressive regime bent on suppressing internal dissent -- particularly dissent directed against Shell -- by whatever means necessary.

THE SHELL GAME

The Royal/Dutch Shell Group is one of the largest businesses in the world, with interests in over 3,000 companies and operations in over 100 countries. Shell's Nigerian subsidiary, the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), accounts for almost 14 percent of Shell production and is the company's biggest producer outside of the United States. Today, SPDC is the sole operator of a joint venture in which it has a 30 percent interest with the majority partner, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), which holds a 55 percent stake in the venture. Industry observers say Shell is interested in purchasing an additional 4 percent of NNPC. Despite the repression, Shell clearly intends to remain in Nigeria for the long haul.

Oil is the single most important commodity in Nigeria, and Shell is the backbone of the oil market. SPDC is currently the largest oil and gas production company in the country, accounting for more than 50 percent of Nigeria's crude oil output. Oil accounts for more than 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange, and more than 80 percent of

federal government revenue.

The links between Shell and Nigeria stretch back to British colonial rule. In the late 1920s, Shell products were first imported into Nigeria. In 1937, Shell formed a joint venture with the British authorities. That venture, known as Shell D'Arcy, was granted carte blanche to explore for oil. But the first commercially viable oil find did not occur until 1956. That oil strike was on Ogoni land.

"Shell originally had an exclusive concession," explains Shehu Othman, an independent oil analyst based at Oxford University. "Once they had the best, they ceded the rest" to the Nigerian government, which in turn either explored that land or sold it to other foreign interests. As a result, Shell today still controls the best, most productive fields in all of Nigeria. Othman concludes that despite the breakup of Shell's monopoly, the company maintains control over "about 60 percent" of the commercially viable oil bearing land in Nigeria. "The Nigerian government cannot afford to let Shell suffer," he says.

Shell is not just the dominant economic player in Nigeria. "Whether they like it or not, Shell is deep in the politics of Nigeria," says Sister Majella, a Catholic missionary who has worked in Nigeria since 1964. There seems to be a revolving door in between the management of SPDC and the Nigerian government. Sister Majella recalls a meeting with Emeka Achebe, general manager for business development of SPDC, where "he spoke with great pride of the former Shell employees that were currently in the government." One prominent Shell alumnus is Chief Rufus Ada George, the former executive governor of Rivers State. Another is Ernest Shonenkan, the former director of SPDC who replaced General Ibrahim Babangida and was President of Nigeria for a brief period before General Sani Abacha, the current ruler.

Shell acknowledges many political problems in Nigeria, but maintains that these are "clearly issues where private companies have neither the right nor the competence to become involved and must be addressed by the people of Nigeria and their government."

Greenpeace's Andrea Goodall says, "Shell's professions of innocence ignore the fact that the Nigerian government is far from democratic, and that Shell itself is the most powerful political actor on the Nigerian stage -- both historically and currently. In Nigeria, the power doesn't come from the people, it comes from Shell. If Shell [executives] wanted to make a difference, they could."

SHELL NEXT DOOR

When Shell first began production of oil on Ogoni land in 1958, it brought drill rigs and promises of a better

life. Today, despite the company's extensive operations -- including nearly 100 wells, two refineries and a fertilizer complex -- the area remains deeply impoverished. The 404 square mile area's only hospital is in an unfinished building and schools rarely open. Shell officials acknowledge that conditions are not ideal in Ogoni and throughout the oil-producing regions, but they blame the Nigerian government for failing to distribute money properly. They say the situation will improve as its community assistance programs progress. The company spends \$21 million a year on Nigerian schools and scholarships, Nickson says.

Sister Majella, who met three times with Shell representatives in Lagos last summer, notes that Shell "spends a lot of time planning and very little time effecting" community assistance programs.

Oil is environmentally destructive, wherever it is produced. But the environmental practices of Shell in Nigeria set a new low for this dirty business. Many of Shell's practices and equipment would be illegal according to the environmental laws of most countries. Irresponsible flaring of gas, poor pipeline placement, chronic oil spills, and unlined toxic waste pits plague the Nigerian Delta region. Nickson, who says he has visited the area, acknowledges that there are environmental problems. But he says activists have falsely characterized the scene as one of environmental devastation. "There are problems, we're addressing these, pipes need to be reviewed," he says. Nickson says Nigeria established a new Federal Environmental Protection Agency in recent years that has established a stringent set of environmental laws meeting international standards. Shell can meet these standards without too significant of an investment, he says.

Footage shot in Ogoni for the British Channel Four documentary, "The Drilling Fields," reveals that gas flares are routinely situated near villages. Ken Saro-Wiwa describes the gas flaring in a December 1992 pamphlet as having "destroyed wildlife and plant life, poisoned the atmosphere and therefore the inhabitants in the surrounding areas and made the residents half deaf and prone to respiratory diseases. Whenever it rains in Ogoni, all we have is acid rain which further poisons water courses, streams, creeks, and agricultural land."

Shell maintains that the problems have come as a result of communities expanding into the vicinity of oil operations and that it relocates gas flares when this happens. The Ogoni and Sister Majella say no gas flare has ever been relocated.

Pictures of Ogoni also reveal a network of poorly maintained, above-ground pipelines that haphazardly crisscross through villages. According to Shehu Othman, some pipelines even run through people's homes. Shell's network

of pipelines in the Nigerian delta is so extensive that if it were laid in one line it would stretch from New York to London, according to the Wall Street Journal.

The antiquated pipelines routinely spill oil. According to an independent record of Shell's spills, Shell spilled 1.6 million gallons from its Nigerian operations in 27 separate incidents from 1982 to 1992. Of the total number of spills recorded from Shell -- which operates in more than 100 countries -- 40 percent were in Nigeria.

Shell spokesman David Williams claims that in 1992 alone, 60 percent of the spills in the Ogoni area were "caused by deliberate sabotage so that compensation claims could be made."

Shehu Othman says that there may be some truth to the claim that some Ogoni are engaging in sabotage of Shell installations. "It's certainly a very small minority though, and compensation is certainly not the motivation. That idea is absolute nonsense, because compensation for spills is a very small sum paid for the loss of crops, but not for the loss of the land itself. Frankly, if there is sabotage it strikes me as a legitimate act of the powerless."

Shell has long maintained that it had conducted a full environmental assessment of the area and of the potential effects of its operations, although it had denied requests by the Ogoni and nongovernmental organizations to scrutinize this assessment. In March 1994, Shell agreed to allow a consultant to the Body Shop access to its assessment. The consultant noted that the studies seem to have been conducted after the construction of the two pipelines that were their subject. The standard practice is to determine the environmental impact of an action prior to undertaking that action. In addition, the consultant concluded that the studies "lack a focused assessment of significant impacts and do not lend themselves to aiding either the planning authorities or Shell in putting the levers in place to effectively manage the environmental implications of [Shell's] operations."

If this is the quality of information that Shell will make available, albeit reluctantly and selectively, what would an on-site investigation of the region reveal? Shell now says that it is "committed to supporting an objective assessment of the impact of oil operations on the Nigerian Delta region [and is] presently talking to a number of outside organizations." The company hopes to announce details of a plan for a new environmental survey of the area by late February 1995. Nickson said he believes the survey will put to rest many environmental concerns about its operations.

BLOOD FOR OIL

Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP spent years trying to convince the Nigerian government to do something about the environmental damage and living conditions in their land. They had drawn up a Bill of Rights for the Ogoni people, and called for true representation in the Nigerian Federation.

The fact that their appeals went nowhere has much to do with being a Southern minority group in a society dominated by Northern ethnic majorities. Eventually, Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP began a vigorous campaign targeting Shell at home and abroad.

Dr. Gary Leton, the ex-Chancellor of Rivers State University, summed up the purpose of the campaign. "We have woken up to find our lands devastated by agents of death called oil companies," he told a Nigerian daily. "Our atmosphere has been totally polluted, our lands degraded, our waters contaminated, our trees poisoned, so much so that our flora and fauna have virtually disappeared. We are asking for the restoration of our environment, we are asking for the basic necessities of life -- water, electricity, education; but above all we are asking for the right to self determination so that we can be responsible for our resources and our environment."

In January 1993, MOSOP organized the first "Ogoni Day" rally, meant to unify the community. Over 300,000 people attended the non-violent demonstration, the focus of which was an end to the repression caused by Shell in Ogoni.

On April 30, 1993, Willbros, a U.S. pipeline contractor, began laying Shell pipes on Ogoni farmland, destroying freshly planted crops. As peaceful protests against the pipe laying culminated in a demonstration of over 10,000 people, soldiers opened fire on the crowd, killing one, wounding 10 and leaving one woman without an arm.

Following this attack, the general manager of SPDC wrote to the Governor of Rivers State -- himself a former Shell employee -- asking for further assistance so that pipeline construction could be completed.

When asked about the military's protection of Shell's interests and installations, Shell officials have said the company is legally bound to notify the authorities if there is a threat to continued oil production. Nickson told the Wall Street Journal that "unavoidably, therefore, the company has on occasion been compelled to ask for assistance" from the Nigerian government. Andrea Goodall of Greenpeace says that this statement amounts to Shell's "tacit consent" to the use of force on its behalf. MOSOP is more blunt, saying, "Ogoni peasants peacefully protesting the seizure of their land have been shot and killed by Nigerian troops hired by Shell."

Repression escalated in the summer of 1993. The government arrested Ken Saro-Wiwa four times, and seized his passport as he sought to attend a UN conference on human rights. He was eventually imprisoned for 31 days, charged with six counts relating to seditious intention, publication and unlawful assembly.

Almost immediately after Saro-Wiwa's release, Ogoni police were drafted away from Ogoni and replaced with officers from different ethnic groups. A series of brutal attacks on Ogoni villages followed, leaving hundreds dead and thousands homeless. Shell and the Nigerian government have blamed the attacks on ethnic clashes, but Amnesty International concludes: "An inquiry into attacks by the neighboring Andoni community in 1993 found no obvious cause for dispute. Soldiers were said to have instigated and assisted the attacks and then followed the attackers into Ogoni villages, destroying houses and detaining people."

OGONI OCCUPIED

As Operation 4/94 has gone into effect, the situation has gone from bad to worse. "In Ogoni, people are terrified out of their wits," says Sister Majella. "They keep lookouts in all of their villages, and simply scatter at the sight of Shell or the military now. All semblance of economic activity has stopped."

Ogoni is virtually cut off from the outside world, though several individuals have succeeded in visiting it. In July 1994, Oronto Douglas of the Nigerian Civil Liberties Organization visited Ledum Mitee, vice president of MOSOP, who was arrested along with Ken Saro-Wiwa in May. In jail, the military flogged Douglas and two companions with an electrical cable after they visited Mitee. Immediately after the beating, the three men were taken to see Major Okuntimo, who is widely reported to be in charge of the military occupation of Ogoni.

According to Douglas's report, "the major said that Shell company has not been fair to him in these operations. He said he has been risking his life and that of his soldiers to protect Shell oil installations."

Ken Saro-Wiwa, writing from jail several weeks after hearing of the incident, claimed, "This confirms a fact that is well-known; that Shell, the multinational oil giant, having successfully waged an ecological war against the Ogoni people since 1958, has been paying protection money to the Nigerian security agencies to complete the genocide which it began. Shell always stands in the background, in these cases denying all responsibility. The truth is gradually coming out."

In January of 1995, MOSOP obtained a May 12, 1994 memo from a government source that gives added weight to the

Ogoni case. The Rivers State Internal Security Task Force memo, signed by Major Okuntimo 12 days before Saro-Wiwa's arrest, says, "Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence." The document goes on to recommend that the 400 soldiers undertake "wasting operations," "wasting" Ogoni leaders who are "especially vocal individuals." Finally, the memo recommends pressure on oil companies for "prompt, regular" payments to support the cost of the military operation.

Nickson says the authenticity of the memo has not been fully established. "If correct," he says, "it is very disturbing." Nickson says Shell had had no knowledge of the memo and no input or contact with the military. "We have condemned the use of violence," he says. Shell has not operated on Ogoni land since January 1993 because of attacks on its staff and equipment, Nickson says. Shell contractors who have continued to work there report vandalism that would cost \$40 million to repair. "We would like to return, but only if welcomed by the people," Nickson says.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

On December 13, 1994, Ken Saro-Wiwa collapsed in his cell. He is reported to be in extremely poor health, suffering from a heart condition and eight months confinement in a jail cell.

Although he has not yet been formally charged, Saro-Wiwa is due to be tried for murder by a special military tribunal in February, 1995. Observers fear that the trial, which is widely regarded as political, will merely pave the way to Saro-Wiwa's execution.

But Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP's efforts have succeeded in focusing the international spotlight on the Ogoni's mistreatment at the hands of Shell and the Nigerian military government. Several days before his collapse, Saro-Wiwa was awarded the 1994 Right Livelihood Award (known as the alternative Nobel Peace Prize) in absentia, for his and MOSOP's environmental campaign.

The Ogoni campaign sparked organizing in oil-producing areas throughout Nigeria. Communities such as the Ogbia, the Igbide, the Ijaw, the Etche, the Izon, the Irri and the Uzere have all recently become much more vocal in airing their historic grievances. The Ogonis success also emboldened and inspired a recent oil workers' strike. Oil strikers demanded the release of Saro-Wiwa and Moshood Abiola, who is widely considered to be the winner of the last election, which the military annulled. After several months, the hungry workers ended their strike last summer.

When asked how Nigeria was able to maintain some of its oil flow during the strike, Nigeria's Ambassador to the

United States, Zubair Kazaure, said "the military filled in." Kazaure, who alleges that the strike had been financed by the Nigerian opposition, did not seem to see anything wrong with military involvement in a commercial enterprise.

Shell spokespeople have reportedly described Nigeria as the company's "worst public relations nightmare" since South Africa. By continuing to prop up a ruthless regime, Shell is repeating its pattern of abuse and repression elsewhere in Africa.

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