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Repression of women's protests in oil-producing delta region

February 2003

Summary

AI Index: AFR 44/008/2003

1. Women's struggle in delta region

In July and August 2002, a wave of protests by women from the Niger delta region against oil companies erupted mainly in Delta and Bayelsa States, in southern Nigeria. These protests constitute a landmark in the quest to ensure women's rights as for the first time, women from several ethnic groups in the Niger delta region put ethnic rivalry aside and joined to claim better living conditions, proper compensations for the communities living on lands that host oil exploitation and a sustainable means of living for their families. This is the executive summary of an Amnesty International document focused on the intervention by the security forces to disperse a peaceful demonstration carried out by unarmed women at the gates of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Limited in Warri, Delta State on 8 August 2002.¹

The women's protest took place in the context of long lasting social unrest in the Niger delta region. Over forty years of oil exploitation in the area have coincided with the degradation of the environment, and there has been little improvement in social services or employment.² By most accounts there has been a dramatic increase in poverty indices and there is a perceptible level of dissatisfaction within the communities, which continues to grow.

According to some of their leaders, the women activists were campaigning at the gates of the oil companies in Warri, calling for community resources and services they felt the oil companies should provide in return for taking their land's mineral resources and which they

¹ SPDC and Chevron Nigeria are joint ventures formed by the Nigerian federal government and several multinational oil companies. The government, through the state owned NNPC (Nigerian National Petroleum Company) holds a majority stake of the shares of both joint ventures. Shell is the operating company in SPDC and ChevronTexaco, the operating company in Chevron Nigeria.

² Nigeria: Environmental Issues. United States Energy Information Administration. April 2002.

enforcement Officials.

3.2. Recommendations to oil companies

- Operating multinationals should denounce every human rights violation committed by the Nigerian security forces attached to their facilities and use their influence with the Nigerian Government to make sure that the Nigerian security forces comply with international standards of law enforcement in their operations to safeguard their oil operations.
- In relation to the incidents in Warri, Shell Petroleum Development Company and Chevron Nigeria Limited must publicly denounce the behaviour of the Nigerian security forces and officially protests to the Nigerian authorities.
- When consulted prior to an operation by the security forces in relation with their operations, the operating companies must unequivocally and publicly express their opposition to any action contrary to international human rights standards, in particular the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials.

This report summarizes a 8-page document (3,004 words), : Nigeria: Repression of women's protests in oil-producing delta region (AI Index: AFR 44/008/2003) issued by Amnesty International in February 2003. Anyone wishing further details or to take action on this issue should consult the full document. An extensive range of our materials on this and other subjects is available at <http://www.amnesty.org> and Amnesty International news releases can be received by email:

<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/news>

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Repression of women's protests in oil-producing delta region



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Nigeria

Repression of women's protests in oil-producing delta region

1. Introduction

In July and August 2002, a wave of protests by women from the Niger delta region against oil companies erupted mainly in Delta and Bayelsa States, in southern Nigeria. These protests constitute a landmark in the quest to ensure women's rights as for the first time, women from several ethnic groups in the Niger delta region put ethnic rivalry aside and joined to claim better living conditions, proper compensations for the communities living on lands that host oil exploitation and a sustainable means of living for their families. This document focuses on the intervention by the security forces to disperse a peaceful demonstration carried out by unarmed women at the gates of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Limited in Warri, Delta State on 8 August 2002.¹

The women's protest took place in the context of long lasting social unrest in the Niger delta region. Over forty years of oil exploitation in the area have coincided with the degradation of the environment, and there has been little improvement in social services or employment.² By most accounts there has been a dramatic increase in poverty indices and there is a perceptible level of dissatisfaction within the communities, which continues to grow.

According to some of their leaders, the women activists were campaigning for community resources and services they felt the oil companies should provide in return for taking their land's mineral resources and which they felt the men of the community, who monopolize the oil jobs, have failed to obtain. Caught in the cycle of poverty, women lack access to resources and services to change their situation and have minimal opportunities to participate in decision-making at home and in the community.

Oil exports from the delta region amount to over 90% of Nigeria's total foreign exchange earnings.³ The region has, therefore, an enormous strategic value for the Nigerian economy.

¹ SPDC and Chevron Nigeria are joint ventures formed by the Nigerian federal government and several multinational oil companies. The government, through the state owned NNPC (Nigerian National Petroleum Company) holds a majority stake of the shares of both joint ventures. Shell is the operating company in SPDC and ChevronTexaco, the operating company in Chevron Nigeria.

² Nigeria: Environmental Issues. United States Energy Information Administration. April 2002.

³ BBC Business News. 31 July 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/2164873.stm>

2.2. Seizure of Chevron Nigeria Ltd. Platform in Escravos

On 8 July 2002, women from the Ugborodo local community occupied for eleven days the Escravos crude oil export terminal in Delta State, operated by Chevron Nigeria Ltd. The unarmed women, seeking jobs for their sons and local investment, initially retained over 700 Chevron workers by blocking sea and air accesses to the facility. The workers were gradually released.

Witnesses from the Ugborodo community told Amnesty International that several hundred women from other communities around Warri, mainly of the Isekiri ethnic group, joined them one week after the platform was seized. According to community leaders, when they arrived on the platform, there were already 500 women gathered there.

According to Chevron Nigeria Limited, around 180 women seized Escravos Terminal. They were given food by Chevron Nigeria Ltd. and reached an agreement with the company after ten days of negotiations. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the community and Chevron Nigeria representatives was signed on 17 July 2002.⁶

3. Repression of women's protests by security forces in Warri

On 8 August 2002, over 3000 Isekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo women protested at the gates of the operational headquarters of both Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Ltd. in Warri (Delta State).

According to testimonies given to an Amnesty International delegation, protesters arrived at the gates of the operational headquarters of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron Nigeria Ltd. in Warri around 6:30 am on 8 August. A combined group of mobile policemen and soldiers started to beat them up at 6:00 pm, without any provocation, without any warning and without giving any time for the women, who were sitting on the ground, to disperse. The security forces launched the attack throwing tear gas, shooting in the air and beating up the women.

Witnesses told Amnesty International that a combined force of military and mobile police arrived at the gate of SPDC from inside the premises of the company and threw tear gas as they were approaching the women. When the security forces arrived at the level of the protesters, witnesses claim that they began to whip, kick and beat the women with the back of their guns. According to witnesses, among the protesters were elderly women and women carrying babies.

⁶ Chevron Nigeria Ltd meeting with Amnesty International. Lagos, 20 September 2002.

of Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials: "In the dispersal of assemblies that are unlawful but non-violent, law enforcement officials shall avoid the use of force or, where that is not practicable, shall restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary."⁷

The federal government must ensure that all those members of the security forces allegedly responsible for ordering or exerting excessive use of force are investigated and sanctioned with disciplinary measures or judged, when required, according to international standards of fair trials. Every law enforcement officer under investigation should be suspended from active duty pending the outcome of the investigation.

3.2. Shell Petroleum Development Company's reaction

Representatives for the Western division of SPDC in Warri, told an Amnesty International delegation on 30 September 2002, that on 8 August, supernumerary police (SPDC internal security force) informed SPDC that women were protesting and blocking the entrance of SPDC installations in Warri and that they also blocked part of the residential area. At the same time, there was an action by junior staff belonging to a trade union over short term contracts of drivers. According to SPDC, the events in Escravos had no connection with protests in Warri, except that both women's actions were orchestrated by the union taking advantage of the press coverage given to the Escravos protest.

SPDC representatives told Amnesty International that SPDC managers had a discussion with the Head of Warri Command of the police and the Commissioner of Police of Delta State to try and find a way out of the situation. The conclusion of the meeting was that they would try to establish a dialogue with the protesters. They created a negotiating commission and the women did the same, but, according to SPDC, the men from the union interfered preventing the women to enter into a dialogue with SPDC representatives.

According to SPDC representatives in their meeting with Amnesty International, the company was informed that the Inspector General of the police, in consultation with the army, had decided to send a combined force of policemen and army soldiers to disperse the crowd with an important display of force to show strength and determination.⁸

In their meeting with Amnesty International, a SPDC representative also claimed that no woman was harmed during the action by the combined force of army and police. He said that to his best recollection of the facts, two or three women were treated at the Shell Ogonu

⁷ The Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials were adopted by the Eighth United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, Havana, Cuba, 27 August to 7 September 1990.

⁸ The Inspector General of the Police is the highest ranked officer in the Nigeria Police Force.

with whom we do business."¹⁰

Amnesty International regrets that Chevron Nigeria does not acknowledge the incident that took place on 8 August. This behaviour contradicts ChevronTexaco's approach to responsible corporate citizenship. ChevronTexaco pledges its corporate web-page "to conduct business in a socially responsible and ethical manner... support universal human rights... protect the environment, and the communities where we work... learn from and respect cultures in which we work."¹¹

4. Women's protests in the area

Incidents like the ones described earlier are not unusual in Nigeria. Indeed, Chevron Nigeria itself has been subjected to similar demonstrations in recent months. On 14 July 2002, Ijaw women from the Gbaramatu community occupied four oil pumping stations (Bakarava-Okoitoru, Abiteye, Otunana and Obuakeva) of Chevron Nigeria in the Niger delta, demanding investment, jobs and basic social infrastructure, such as clean drinking water, electricity, schools and clinics. Both protests were settled by Chevron Nigeria after it agreed to increase recruitment in local communities and pledged to finance school, electricity and water.

On 29 July 2002, over 1,000 women from Ekpan, near Warri, in Delta State, besieged Chevron Nigeria administrative office, barricading the entrance. They reached an agreement with the company within hours, and the women left the building.

The incidents of July and August 2002 send a clear message that social unrest is expanding in the Niger delta region. This was the first time that women had protested about oil exploitation and their actions threaten to exacerbate social confrontation in the area. Economic interests linked to oil exploitation still bring along human rights violations and abuses. The operations of oil companies are not exempted from criticism and some of their effects on the communities and their environment are utterly pernicious.¹²

All actors involved in the complex context of the delta region, federal and state governments, oil companies and their employees, community leaders and the security forces must prioritise the physical integrity of those who inhabit the delta region. The repression of unarmed women should not be accepted and must be investigated. The federal government must be responsible for the actions of the security forces. Alongside, oil companies, must honour the principles they claim to stand for, exerting their influence effectively and publicly to

¹⁰ ChevronTexaco : The Global Sullivan Principles
(www.chevrontexaco.com/social_responsibility/human_rights)

¹¹ ChevronTexaco Way (www.chevrontexaco.com/social_responsibility/human_rights)

¹² Amnesty International has witnessed the profoundly negative environmental and social impact of oil spills in places like Nembe, in Bayelsa State, or Ogbodo and Yorla, in Rivers State.

