

WHO WILL SAVE THE NIGER DELTA?

BY: ALICE UKOKO 2006

The Niger Delta, according to the Nigerian Government, extends over about 70,000 square kilometres and makes up 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. Officially the region includes land in nine States of the Federation namely, Abia State, Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State, Imo State Ondo State and Rivers State.

With an estimated population of 20 million people made up of more than 40 ethnic groups, about 250 dialects live in the Delta. The traditional occupation of the people is fish and crop farming.

That Nigeria is a major oil and natural gas producer is due to the richness of the Niger Delta. Officially, Nigeria produces about 2.5 million barrels of oil per day this figure excludes the large volume that is lost to illegal bunkers every day. The recent increase in world oil price of about \$70 US dollars per barrel, the Niger Delta has become a great source of wealth to the Nigerian Government.

Flaring of natural gas extracted in oil wells in the region has had very grave environmental impact on the environment resulting in the destruction of the people's traditional means of livelihood. This has contributed to the high rate of absolute poverty in the region. The high rate of gas flared into the air represents one of the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions on earth.

Although Nigeria's 1999 Constitution provides for the protection of the environment, successive Governments have continued to ignore these constitutional provisions in relation to the Niger Delta. Governments have been more concerned about oil and gas production levels with a disregard for the adverse environmental impact that the 50 years of oil exploration has had in the region.

Thus, the oil richness of the Niger Delta has been converted to a curse for the people, their environment and their hope for the future.

Who will save Niger Delta?

Oil spills represent a major source of environmental pollution in the region. Whereas the Multinational Companies are responsible for the lack of maintenance of oil pipes, gas flaring and the disposal of chemical waste in our rivers, the people of the region are blamed for such spillages in an attempt to avoid responsibility for such destructions.

Fires resulting from zero maintenance of oil and gas pipes laid over ground and illegal bunkering activities of some high ranking personalities in the country have been blamed on the people of the region who are victims.

Although Nigeria is believed to be a democracy, any attempt by the people of the region to express their fears for their environment, economic disadvantage and the

desire to dialogue with Governments and Oil Corporations operating in their communities are met with military brutality and deaths.

The people of the Niger Delta needs Justice through fair distribution of the wealth flowing from the region, without which there would be no peace and sustainable development.

Although hostage takings in recent times is condemnable, the criminal neglect of the region and the exclusion of the people from the enjoyment of their own wealth is equally condemnable.

I wish to stress that the neglect of the Niger Delta will continue to threaten peace and the unity of Nigeria. Thus, in-coming Government should think before they follow the path of past governments.

Nigeria is signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and so, should be held to account to the world if not to the people of the Niger Delta for the abuse of the rights of the people.

History has shown that Nigerian governments are hostile to the interest of the people and as such, fail to regulate and hold the multinational corporations operating in the region accountable for the environmental devastations of the region. Thus, the issue of who will save the Niger Delta is essential to the survival of the region, the unity of Nigeria and world peace.

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