

# FLARE UP!

## NIGER DELTA WOMEN TAKE ON OIL COMPANIES

BY SPRIG

*"We are all women here. We are angry and grieved—that is why we have come together. We cannot rely on our husbands anymore for this fight, because they are not giving us the desired results. Moreover, these days you know that it is the women that take up most of the responsibilities.*

*Me, I am a fisher woman. My only occupation is fishing. But nowadays, when I go to the riverine areas, there are*

*no fish. Oil pollution and gas flaring have killed all the fish. The farmers who farm the land cannot get anything from their land anymore because of environmental degradation. Oil spillages have destroyed their lands.*

*As a result of all this, we are hungry. Our children are suffering. This gas they are flaring is causing so many of us to die prematurely. Three days ago, I lost my sister. She died from suffocation. She was just crying "My throat, my throat," and she died within 30 minutes.*

*They do not give our women employment, we are jobless and have no money because our means of livelihood have been destroyed. We are hungry—that's why we came here. Gas flaring has destroyed our lives."*

—ELIZABETH EBIDO, ITSEKIRI PROTEST LEADER

On an American television, the camera pulls back its focus from a scene of parrots chattering in lush green surroundings. Our viewing experience of this tropical environment widens, as we gain an aerial scope. From up high, we are looking down on an island. The pattern of tropical vegetation now reveals the ominous symbol of the Shell oil corporation.

This 30-second commercial of US televised greenwash is supposed to make us think that Shell is environmentally friendly. In fact, it holds a deeper, more insidious message reflected in the political reality of the oil-rich Niger Delta. Shell and ChevronTexaco have made a devastating imprint on this watershed and the indigenous Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ogoni and Ilaje peoples who depend upon it. Against tremendous odds, these people have met multinational corporations with resistance for the past 35 years. Pipeline sabotage, protest and nonviolent hostage-taking are as common as company oil spills.

Nigeria is the world's sixth-largest oil exporter, accounting for approximately one-twelfth of the oil imported by the US. Sales of crude oil account for more than 85 percent of the Nigerian government's revenue. Five companies tower over Nigeria—the British/Dutch Shell, the Italian AGIP, the French Elf-Aquitaine and US giants ChevronTexaco and Mobil.

Each operates in partnership with the Nigerian National Petroleum Company, a government-run corporation.

These oil companies claim that their activities are conducted under the highest environmental standards and that the impact of oil on the environment of the delta is minimal. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa, former spokesperson for the Movement of the Survival of the Ogoni People until he was unjustly hanged in 1995, maintained that Ogoniland has been "completely devastated by three decades of reckless oil exploitation."

In 1956, the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta triggered a chain of events that led to the political and economic marginalization of its inhabitants. Rivers, forests, mangrove swamps, farmland and fishing creeks have all experienced devastation.

Oil has been more of a curse than a blessing for the people. Nigerians once believed that corporate promises of economic prosperity would come true. Instead, they have been at the receiving end of horrendous govern-

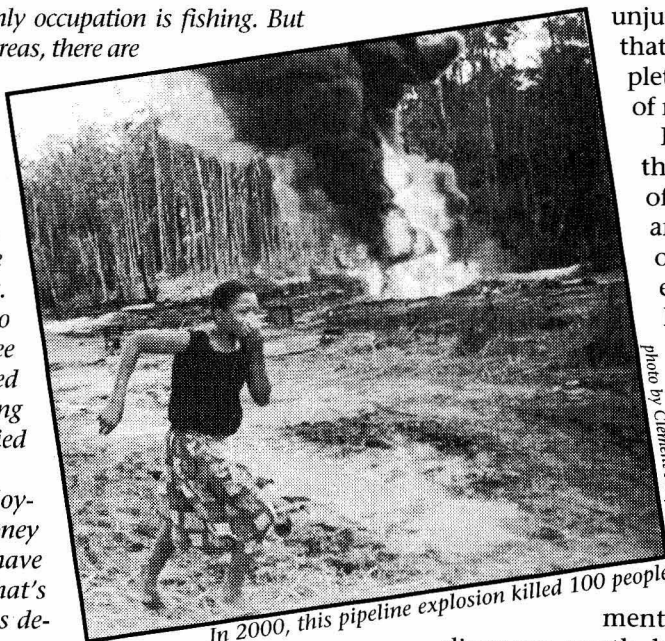
ment repression and brutality. In-

digenuous youth have been shot or wounded routinely during protests. Environmental Rights Action in Nigeria calls for a complete withdrawal of multinational oil companies for these reasons and more.

This Summer, actions were organized by indigenous women working together for their survival. These actions were unique because they were carried out by women who were united in protest despite a history of long-term intertribal strife. Nigeria, like all of Africa, is comprised of a glorious patchwork of indigenous cultures. Nigerians represent more than 250 different ethnic groups, whose relations have been strained by more than a century of British rule. To add insult to injury, the economic disparity forged by oil corporations has increased the intertribal tension as they each vie for a small bit of prosperity.

It is in this complex political climate that 3,000 Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ilaje women took everyone by surprise by working in unison to confront Shell and ChevronTexaco. Nigerian writer Blessyn Okpowo witnessed on August 8, "As early as five a.m., the quiet waterfronts in Warri came alive. Special boats and passenger vessels of various shapes and sizes began to arrive at the waterfronts. Each boat was full to capacity with women singing solemn songs in the various dialects. Their songs were sorrowful dirges lamenting the pitiful conditions of the Niger Delta."

They seized the Ogunnu operational headquarters of ChevronTexaco and Shell by nonviolently overpowering the security guards and entering before the shift change.



In 2000, this pipeline explosion killed 100 people.

photo by Clement Nkave

They carried placards accusing the companies of polluting their environment, and they forced work to stop. Women and children barricaded the gates and set-up canopies. They brought food and bedding and were prepared to stay as long as needed. Ilaje leader B.I. Ugbasanin vowed, "All will not be well for the oil companies in our areas until they start treating us as human beings that deserve a good life."

Soon after, the women had a face-off with security agents, armed soldiers and police. Scores of women were seriously injured as soldiers used wire whips and kicked them. Four soldiers and three policemen beat Alice Youwuren, a widow and mother of seven, unconscious. She was admitted to a Shell clinic in Warri. According to newspaper reports, another woman was shot dead after a soldier fired into the crowd to disperse the protesters. Shell and ChevronTexaco deny the reports of injuries and murder. They say the women were hired by the union to do a counter-protest and create negative publicity.

They do corroborate that the remaining women were teargassed and that the situation was quelled the following day.

From August 14-23, 100 Ilaje women took over a smaller Ewan oil platform. After nine days, ChevronTexaco decided to ignore this smaller group and wait them out. When the Ilajewomen realized that they were not

perceived as a threat to business as usual, they left on their own accord.

These protests were the latest in a month of all-women demonstrations that began July 8 with a 10-day siege of ChevronTexaco's offices in Escravos near Warri (see *EF!* August-September 2002). The Itsekiri women, after taking over an offshore oil terminal, used a potent cultural shaming tactic: They threatened to remove their clothes. Public nudity, a local taboo, would have embarrassed the 1,000 oil workers on the terminals who regard these older women in high esteem.

On July 16, Ijaw women took over four oil flow stations, 50 miles south-east of Escravos. These combined July actions cost ChevronTexaco three million dollars in lost revenue. Talks with ChevronTexaco ensued and both parties came to an agreement that temporarily satisfied the Ijaw women and Itsekiri women. However, the communities near Escravos received no sign that the company would follow through. No hard copies of the agreement were provided, nor did they sign any. This led them to commit to the actions last month.

The public role of women in the Nigerian political arena has great potential. Their willingness to work together is a powerful antidote if it can be sustained. Matters will only become more complicated as George Bush, Jr. wars with other oil nations.

The US is looking into doubling its oil imports from Nigeria in an effort to be less reliant on the Middle East. Nigeria's military government seems happy to further develop and destroy the region for short-term profit and greater political power on the international front.

In solidarity with the people of Niger Delta, take on a Shell or ChevronTexaco near you. Contact: ChevronTexaco, 575 Market St, San Francisco, CA 94105; (415) 894-7700.

For more information, contact Project Underground, (510) 705-8981; [www.moles.org](http://www.moles.org).

## BARE BONES

### Peruvian Amazon Invaded

A pipeline project is proposing to drill, process and ship oil from the Lower Urubamba region of the Peruvian Amazon beginning in December 2003. On land belonging to the Nahua and other indigenous groups, 400 million cubic feet of gas and 20,000 barrels of liquid petroleum would be pumped each day and transported through pipelines to processing plants.

Pluspetrol Petroleum, the company who would profit from the construction of the pipeline, has a sordid history of oil spills, toxic contamination and related sicknesses in the communities surrounding its other operations.

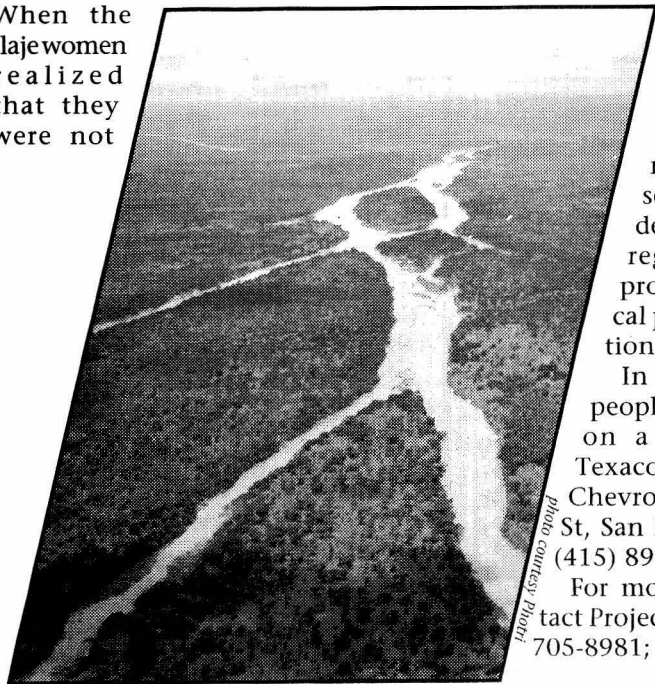
Environmental and indigenous advocates point to Pluspetrol's violations of internationally recognized indigenous rights when it directly contacted groups living in voluntary isolation. In the 1980s, 50 percent of the Nahua died from illnesses introduced by workers when Shell explored for oil in the area.

### Hopi Underwrite Pipeline

On July 18, Hopi politicians offered to underwrite a 100-million-dollar pipeline from Lake Powell Reservoir to the Navajo Reservation in Northern Arizona that would provide water for Peabody Coal. The pipeline could eventually fuel a new power plant owned by the Hopi government.

Currently, the Peabody Coal mine uses more than one billion gallons of groundwater a year for its slurry line that pumps coal to Laughlin, Nevada. Peabody's lease on Black Mesa expires in 2005, and the Hopi Tribal Council has said it will oppose Peabody's application for renewal until an alternate source of water is found.

Traditional Hopi, Navajo and environmental groups oppose the continuation of the coal mine.



The mighty Niger Delta