

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>

In view of the importance of the oil sector, security forces have not hesitated to repress any organisation or individual likely to disrupt oil exploration, which would obstruct the generation of revenue for Nigeria. Numerous human rights violations linked to economic interests were recorded under the ruling of past military governments.

The most widely known example of such repression was the execution after an unfair trial in 1995 of nine political activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, who had campaigned against environmental damage by oil companies and for increased autonomy for the Ogoni ethnic group.⁴

Following the establishment of a civilian government in 1999, allegations of human rights violations by the Nigerian security forces have not, however, stopped. Extrajudicial execution of alleged “saboteurs” of oil installations or robbers of oil equipment, excessive use of force to repress protests against oil companies or government, and harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and activists critical of the performance of the oil companies or the government in relation with oil exploitation continue to be reported.⁵

2. Antecedents of recent women’s protests

2.1. Navy intervention in Abiteye flow station

The antecedent to the recent wave of women’s protests in Delta State is to be found in the Abiteye community. On 18 June 2002, several dozen women from this local community obstructed the channel to a Chevron Nigeria flow station with canoes, demanding to use again the company’s crew change boat, which had been made available to them in the past and which, they claim, is the only means of transport to link the Abiteye community with the other communities in the area.

The protest was allegedly repressed by the Nigerian Navy which sunk several of the women’s canoes. According to several women’s rights leaders, that action inspired women from other ethnic groups in the area, as the news about the protest spread throughout the delta region encouraging women to assemble and discuss further actions.

⁴ See Nigeria entry in Amnesty International report 1996. AI document Nigeria; the Ogoni trials and detentions (AFR 44/020/95)

⁵ See Nigeria entry in Amnesty International report 2002 and AI report Nigeria: Security forces. Serving to protect and respect human rights? (AI 44/023/02)

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.

- **Titi Omafor (f)**, 70 years old, went to protest at SPDC's gate in Warri. She told Amnesty International delegates that a soldier shook her and kicked her repeatedly in both legs. The Amnesty International delegation confirmed that she could not move her lower limbs when they saw her. She showed clear marks of beating on her legs. According to her, she was left on the ground by policemen and soldiers and two other women carried her to a clinic. She didn't hear any warning by the police prior to the attack.
- **Elisabeth Ebido (f)**, 45 years old, an Itsekiri community leader, told an Amnesty International delegation that she took part in protests at Chevron Nigeria Ltd gate in Warri and that she was beaten repeatedly with the back of a gun by four members of the combined police-army force deployed there. She showed the Amnesty International delegation deep wounds in her arms and legs. According to her testimony, the police asked the women who their leader was and she was targeted.
- **Eda Ederougun (f)**, 89 years old, went to protest at SPDC's gate in Warri. She told Amnesty International that she was beaten with a "kokobo" (a whip made of twisted animal skin), as a result of which she fell down. She still could not move when she was visited in October by the Amnesty International delegation. She was taken to her home because the other women thought she would not be safe at the SPDC hospital. She showed Amnesty International deep scars on her back and legs.
- **Alice Ukoko (f)**, 42 years old, one of the women's leaders, was at the gates of SPDC. She describes what happened to her as follows: "two of the armed men caught up with me at SPDC gate. One of them whipped me continuously holding his hand with the other hand. At one point, he knocked me to the ground and continued to whip me while at the same time he ordered me to run". She showed Amnesty International deep scars in her neck and back.

According to women's leaders, nobody, either from the Nigerian federal government, SPDC or Chevron Nigeria Ltd. consented to discuss with them during the time they were protesting peacefully. The women said to have been brutally dispersed without having been given the opportunity to dialogue with either government or oil companies' representatives.

3.1. Federal government's reaction

Amnesty International deeply regrets that the Nigerian Government denied all reports of excessive use of force by its security forces in Warri. No investigation on the allegations of police and armed forces brutality has been carried out.

The federal government is ultimately responsible for the actions of the security forces, and therefore, for the alleged repression of unarmed protesters in Warri. According to principle 13

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 Ogunu

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.

Clinic in Warri, with heat exhaustion and fatigue. He added: “No one was killed, and I am unaware of anyone injured or even requiring medical attention”.

On 2 October 2002, the Amnesty International delegation visited Shell Ogonu Clinic in Warri, where some of the women protestors were treated. Medical records showed six women who claimed having been beaten. None were admitted, and they were all released after treatment. According to the Amnesty International delegation, based on medical records showed to them, only two out of the eight cases showed no evidence of beatings. According to the medical records, one patient showed marks consistent with whipping and four other were treated for abrasion and cuts.

After these facts were pointed out to the SPDC representative, he rectified his statement in a letter sent to Amnesty International on 15 October 2002, in which he wrote: “I... was indeed informed by those present at the site that a number of women were treated for heat exhaustion and fatigue.” And he added that: “...It is certainly true that four of the eight women treated (in the Shell clinic) said that they had been beaten. However, in only one case is there any evidence that this might have been the case.”

The lack of willingness by SPDC’s managers to investigate the events that took place and to express their concerns at allegations of security forces brutality on unarmed women contrasts with the Shell International Management Primer, made public in 1998, which states: “When an operating company does not have complete control, that is, when the issue related to incidents did not take place on their site or where the company has limited legal or actual influence, the capacity of influence is clearly diminished. However, that does not mean that the issue can be ignored.”⁹

However, Amnesty International considers that the influence of the company should not be underestimated, since, according to SPDC, the Nigerian security forces consulted the company prior to the incidents on the measures to be taken towards the protesters.

3.3. Chevron Nigeria Ltd’s reaction

In a letter to Amnesty International on 5 December 2002, Chevron Nigeria Ltd stated: “Chevron does not have a statement relating to the issue of a few women who came to the front of our office on 8 August (...). We were not aware of the repression by a combined force of the mobile police and the army as you referenced”.

ChevronTexaco has also publicly expressed “our support for universal human rights and, particularly, those of our employees, the communities within which we operate, and parties

⁹ Shell International Petroleum Company: “Business and Human Rights, a management primer”. (http://www2.shell.com/home/media-en/downloads/business_and_human_rights_primer.pdf)

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](http://www.chevrontexaco.com/social_responsibility/human_rights))

¹¹ ChevronTexaco Way ([www.chevrontexaco.com/social_responsibility/human rights](http://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.

denounce allegations of human rights violations to protect their economic activities and ensure that such violations do not take place again.

5. Amnesty International recommendations

5.1. Recommendations to the Nigerian federal government

- The Nigerian government must ensure that independent investigations into allegations of excessive use of force against peaceful protesters are put in place. All those responsible must be brought to justice and judged according to international standards of fair trial. The Nigerian government must take decisive steps to prevent these human rights violations from taking place in the future, publicly apologise to the victims and ensure a proper compensation for them.
- The federal authorities must ensure that training programs for the federal police and the armed forces include specific training on the use of force according to international standards such as 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.

5.2. 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.