The Shell oil corporation has blood on its hands, and a worldwide boycott of Shell products is under way. Two recent reports[1,2] on the Shell subsidiary in Nigeria, Africa, have documented massive environmental destruction in the Niger River delta region, where Shell has spilled some 56 million gallons of oil onto farmlands and into community water supplies.[1,p.45] The destroyed land and water formerly provided sustenance for an indigenous people, the Ogoni. A recent video confirms these reports of Shell's environmental abuse and mismanagement in Ogoniland.[3]

But Shell's crimes are deeper still. When Ogoni activists organized to demand that Shell clean up spilled oil, and share oil profits more equitably with the Ogoni people, the Nigerian military dictatorship -- with financial assistance, logistical support, and guns provided by Shell[1,pgs.23,43,91-92] -- conducted a campaign of terror in which at least 1800 Ogoni people were murdered, some of them tortured to death. [1,p.95]

The Ogoni peoples' struggle against Shell burst into headlines November 10, 1995, when the Nigerian dictatorship executed 9 Ogoni environmental activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa. Saro-Wiwa had received the Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa April 17, 1995 in recognition of his environmental work on behalf of the Ogoni people. Saro-Wiwa had also received the Right Livelihood Award December 9, 1994.[1,p.95] Both awards are said to carry prestige equivalent to the Nobel peace prize. In addition to being an environmentalist and community leader, Saro-Wiwa was well-known in his homeland, and internationally, as a poet and essayist.[4] His last words, just as he was executed by hanging, were, "Lord, take my soul but the struggle continues!"

Within weeks of the executions, Shell contracted with the Nigerian dictatorship to build a large liquefied natural gas plant, thus sending a signal that it was business as usual for Shell and that Shell was continuing to support the military dictatorship.[2,p.10]

According to the World Council of Churches, key witnesses for the prosecution at Ken Saro-Wiwa's trial have signed sworn affidavits saying they were bribed by Shell to testify against Saro-Wiwa.[1,p.43]

Since late 1995, the dictatorship has been holding 19 more Ogoni environmental activists, charged with the same crime for which the Ogoni 9 were executed. The World Council of Churches reported in late 1996 that, "...as a result of the inhuman treatment, torture, denial of medical care, starvation and poor sanitary conditions, most of the detainees are in very poor health."[1,p.75]

The Ogoni people --500,000 of them[1,p.8] -- inhabit a 404-square-mile area called the Rivers State in Nigeria in west Africa. They represent 0.05% of the Nigerian population, so they are a tiny minority. Ken Saro-Wiwa compared the Ogoni to other small nations: "...as a result of the inhuman treatment, torture, denial of medical care, starvation and poor sanitary conditions, most of the detainees are in very poor health."[1,p.75]

Observers from the World Council of Churches describe a site where Shell had spilled oil in 1969: "Even though this spill occurred 26 years ago, its devastating impact is still very apparent," they wrote. [1,p.34] The soil and oil are caked together into a thick black crust which covers the area. Liquid crude oil is still present in deep crevices (2 to 3 feet deep), formed in spots where trees once stood.... The air remains polluted by the vapour from the spilled crude oil; this becomes particularly noticeable when the south-west wind blows. The oil spill seems to have polluted the creek nearby. The oil flowed into the body of water and we were told that it can still be seen floating on the surface of the creek water that people still drink. We were unable to move near the creek as the earth was dangerously soggy with a combination of soil, oil, and water.... It is amazing that so much devastation exists after 26 years."[1,p.34]

Since the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, his brother, Dr. Owens Wiwa, an articulate, soft-spoken physician, was himself held prisoner (without charges) by Nigerian authorities on more than one occasion. [1,p.93] He is now a political exile living in Toronto, Canada, though most of his time is spent on the road,

Between 1976 and 1980, Shell operations caused 784 separate oil spills in Nigeria.[1,p.45]. From 1982 to 1992, 27 additional spills were recorded. Since Shell "ceased oil production" in Ogoniland in 1993, Shell admits another 24 oil spills have occurred there.[1,p.33]

Shell operates in 100 countries, but 40% of all its oil spills have occurred in Nigeria.[1,p.28] Shell says the spills result from "sabotage" but the World Council of Churches reports "there has not been one single piece of evidence produced by Shell to back up its claims that oil spills in Ogoniland were caused by sabotage."[1,p.39]

Shell controls at least 60% of all the oil reserves in Nigeria and oil accounts for 80% of Nigeria's total revenues and 90% of its foreign exchange earnings.[1,p.44]. As a result, Shell is an extremely powerful political force in Nigeria. The World Council of Churches has described a revolving door --Shell executives becoming Nigerian political officials, and Nigerian political officials becoming Shell employees, [1,p.44] However, Shell maintains that it has no political influence and cannot affect the fate of political prisoners in Nigeria.

Shell admits to 3000 polluted sites affected by oil operations on Ogoni soil. According to the World Council of Churches, Shell also admits to flaring 1.1 billion cubic feet of natural gas each day for 35 years, causing acid rain in the Niger delta during about 10% of the days each year.[1,p.41] Furthermore, the flares produce a rain of fine particles, a cancer-causing soot that permeates everything --land water, homes, lungs.

Shell's environmental abuses in Ogoniland came as a shock to observers sent by the World Council of Churches. They wrote, "Having followed all the events in Ogoniland, reading all the reports and seeing the videos such as DRILLING FIELDS and DELTA FORCE3, did not prepare us for the devastation we saw at the numerous spill sites we visited," they wrote. [1,p.24]

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Shell, a Dutch company, is the 10th largest corporation in the world, and No. 1 in profitability.[2,p.4] Shell has 96 oil production wells in Ogoniland, 5 flow stations (large pumping stations), and numerous gas flares which have operated continuously for 35 years.[1,p.31] In addition, Shell maintains many high-pressure oil pipelines criss-crossing Ogoniland, carrying oil from other parts of Nigeria to the shipping terminal at Bonny.[1,p.32] In response to growing pressure for reform in Ogoniland in 1993, Shell ceased oil production there, but retained its network of pipelines carrying oil produced elsewhere in Nigeria. (The World Council of Churches finds evidence that Shell has not in fact ceased oil production in Ogoniland,[1,pgs.31-33] but Shell insists its production wells are idle.)

Since the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa, his brother, Dr. Owens Wiwa, has been touring the world describing the Ogoni peoples' struggle against the combined forces of Shell and the military dictators of Nigeria. Dr. Wiwa, an articulate, soft-spoken physician, was himself held prisoner (without charges) by Nigerian authorities on more than one occasion. [1,p.93] He is now a political exile living in Toronto, Canada, though most of his time is spent on the road,
urging people to boycott Shell products.

In late March of this year, U.S. environmental justice activists met in Atlanta, Georgia to discuss environmental justice struggles across the U.S. and abroad. Dr. Wiwa gave the keynote address. "Our people are dying at the hands of our government and Shell Oil," Dr. Wiwa told the assembled activists in Atlanta. Dr. Robert D. Bullard, a well-known environmental justice leader and author of CONFRONTING ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM: VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS, told the Atlanta meeting, "the quest for healthy and sustainable communities and environmental justice does not stop at U.S. borders... we have a moral and ethical obligation to direct our collective action and purchasing power to respond to Dr. Wiwa and the Ogoni's struggle in Nigeria, just as we responded to the oppression of apartheid in South Africa."

Asked recently what Americans could do to help the Ogoni people, Dr. Wiwa gave four recommendations:


2. Encourage selective purchasing contracts, such as the one now in force in Oakland, California. Last fall the Oakland City Council passed a city-wide ordinance prohibiting the city from doing business with Nigeria. Dr. Wiwa is urging all city councils to adopt selective purchasing laws to prevent their city from investing in or trading with Nigeria OR ANY COMPANIES CARRYING OUT BUSINESS IN NIGERIA.

3. Pressure Congress to impose sanctions against Nigeria, just as the U.S. has recently done against Burma for human rights abuses.

4. Contact the president of Shell's U.S. subsidiary: Philip J. Carroll, Shell Oil Company, P.O. Box 2463, Houston, TX 77252; (800) 248-4257; fax (713) 241-4044.

Mr. Carroll may respond that Shell's U.S. subsidiary has nothing to do with what's happening in Nigeria. But 10% of Shell's profits come from its U.S. operations, so the U.S. subsidiary has major clout with its Dutch parent corporation. Refusal to exercise that clout is a moral failure. Up to now, Mr. Carroll himself has blood on his hands, in our view.

Even if Mr. Carroll cannot understand the moral argument, you could tell him you will be boycotting Shell's products until they clean up their environmental mess in Nigeria and fully compensate the Ogoni people for past damages and injustices. Mr. Carroll will certainly understand the meaning of "boycott."

To get breaking news about the campaign to end Shell's environmental and human rights abuses in Ogoniland, you could join the Internet discussion group, Shell-Nigeria-action. To subscribe to the list, send email to listproc@essential.org with the message: subscribe shell- nigeria-action <your email address>. To post information to the list, address your message to: Shell-Nigeria-Action@essential.org.

For further information, contact:

1) Dr. Owens Wiwa: owens@igc.apc.org

2) Stephen Mills at Sierra Club in Washington, D.C. Telephone (202) 675-6691. Mr. Mills has organized a petition campaign that could use more volunteers.


What is the top priority? BOYCOTT SHELL.

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--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)


[2] PEN Center USA West, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS, SHELL AND NIGERIA (Los Angeles, California: PEN Center USA West, March, 1997). Available from: PEN Center USA West, 672 South Lafayette Park Place #41, Los Angeles, California 90057; telephone (213) 365-8500. PEN is a worldwide association of professional writers.


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