

CAUSES OF TERRORISM? SHELL IN NIGERIA, 1993 TO 2001

October 2001

Terrorism is often the manifestation of frustration vented by the poor and powerless against rich and powerful oppressors.

An example of oppression is the activities of Shell, operating in the Niger Delta. In 1993 I witnessed an oil blow-out at Shell Flow Station Number 5 near the village of Korokoro in Ogoni in the North Eastern Delta. The Shell response to community complaints was a military attack on the village – 25th October 1993 – which resulted in the shooting dead of Nnah Uabari and gunshot injuries to other people. Innocent then of the nature of oil company activities in the Niger Delta, I was outraged; more so when I visited the Shell HQ in London the following May to be told by senior Shell staff that I ought not to worry about the death of one African.

Also during 1993, I visited other parts of the Niger Delta. What I saw profoundly affected me: I concluded that if Western standards of living depended on the environmental and human degradation resulting from oil mining, then European and American values were worthless as a guide to human progress.

Since my earlier visits, Shell has proclaimed that things have got better. My 2001 visit confirmed that the company culture is fixed in a negative attitude towards its host communities. That is: lack of cultural and ecological awareness and sensitivity; a willingness to encourage armed attacks on defenceless communities and to resort to the repression of civil rights rather than negotiation; poor maintenance of its extraction infrastructure and low engineering standards; ignorance of environmental and social impacts; a tendency to tolerate the inefficient management of its compensation and social programme processes; and to lie repeatedly when challenged, until the evidence is irrefutable.

Shell uses murder as a tool of oppression.

The methods used by Shell and by other oil companies who operate in the Niger Delta are outside the Nigerian constitution and the international conventions to which the country is a signatory. These methods are backed up by a militarised government, the civilian population visibly intimidated by an armed and undisciplined police force that is well known for extra-judicial detention, torture and killings. The mobile police are called “kill and go”.

The oil companies in the Niger Delta do not hesitate to use, and in many cases support, the police. They cannot, therefore, detach themselves from responsibility for the violent results of this support.

Back in Lagos in July and later in London, during August 2001, I did indeed come to the conclusion that the conditions that ordinary people in the Niger Delta had suffered would not be solved by reasoning with cynical and culturally blind oil companies. That had been tried and manifestly failed, two of its most famous proponents, Ken Saro Wiwa and Claude Ake, dead. It would not be solved by a dubiously elected democratic government led by a retired general that had already shown itself willing to resort to the same heavy-handed violence as had its predecessors: the recent destruction of the Niger Delta township of Odi has proved that.

What process was left? The people of the Niger Delta are not vindictive, fanatical or violent. On the contrary, despite the awful violence of the oil industry, clearly the Niger Delta people are accommodating, warm-hearted and above all, forgiving, always willing to forget the past, sit down and discuss a way forward. This explains the easy exploitation of the area by greedy and unscrupulous outsiders including the central government and trans-national oil companies backed by foreign governments.

Two examples of Shell's attitude.

The first manifests the culture of lies.

At the beginning of 2001, Shell Nigeria completed an internal report on its community projects in the Niger Delta. The report suggested that many of the projects had failed. Not unreasonably, the local company wanted to withhold publication. However, at the Shell AGM in London in May 2001, Phil Watts, a director, due to become Chairman later in the year, said that "we are happy to present the results to interested parties". The present Chairman, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart, said "it is erroneous to suggest that we kept this secret". Nonetheless, the report was being kept secret as reported in the London Independent of the 18th May: "Shell Denies Nigeria Report is Secret – but it sure is missing" The Economist of the following week reported a similar story.

A small lie but characteristic. There are books on the company's subterfuge and mendacity – Where Vultures Feast, by Okonta and Douglas, Random Press, being one of the most recent – and I have files full of stories on the lies Shell has told about its involvement with the Nigerian military machine and arms importation. It is upon the basis of this ingrained culture of opaqueness that Shell has for years asked communities and NGOs to discuss issues of concern; not surprisingly, frustration results on both sides.

The second example is the murder of Friday Nwido in June in the Ogoni district of Rivers State.

The background, quoted in a contemporary report published by a local NGO Environmental Rights Action (ERA).¹

"On Sunday April 29, 2001 at about 9.30 a.m. a huge explosion took place at the well 10 facility (Yorla Oil Field) and the affected facility rained crude oil sporadically for days into adjacent farmlands, settlements, streams, swamps, lakes and rivers. Mr. Jollyboy Olole (an eyewitness) told ERA that he was inspecting his cassava crops on that fateful Sunday when the explosion occurred. He said the crude rained into his eyes."

On the same afternoon Shell organised a press conference in its staff club in nearby Port Harcourt. Shell staff insisted that the blow-out was caused by sabotage. Yet interestingly, three Texan oil engineers – Roy, Ozzie and Richard – who helped deal with the problem later, were quoted as saying that the blow-out was caused by "mechanical failure due to gas pressure coupled with corrosion of the facility". This makes sense because all over Ogoni there are badly maintained facilities. Shell claims that it is not able to carry out maintenance because of intimidation by local people. The idea is laughable. I myself was repeatedly mistaken for a Shell staff member or contractor, and at no time was I threatened or did I feel under threat from local people. The threat or feeling of danger came only from the "kill and go" who are, in any event, willing, able and actually do provide the sort of security that Shell feels it needs. Shell staff did in fact come to nearby Kpite while I was in the area, in order to entank fuel spilling from a broken pipeline; one that I also inspected and that showed severe signs of corrosion.

Friday celebrated his thirtieth birthday in June and worked as a welder in Port Harcourt to where he commuted every day on his motorbike. Also, he was a farmer and fisherman; "a true Ogoni Man". Seventeen people were dependant on him including his mother, his wife and three children.

The story goes that following the blow-out at Yorla, a group of local youths, including Friday, who seems to have been accepted as a leader, went to see Shell in Port

¹ The NGO, Environmental Rights Action, for which I was a founding trustee, is affiliated to Friends of the Earth, Netherlands.

Harcourt about clearing up the mess. It was agreed that Shell staff would meet the youths at the site to discuss the situation. However, Shell arrived on the scene, contrary to the perceived agreement, with all their equipment, plus their Wilbros contractors. Nonetheless, it was agreed with Friday that the youths would do the labouring work. The operation was not completed that day and it was further agreed that Shell would employ the same youths when they returned to complete the work. No payment was made.

However, contrary to the agreement, Shell did not send a prior message of their return so that the group of youths were not on site when the clearance contractors returned. As a result another group was employed. By the time Friday and Co learned what had happened, the work had been completed and by coincidence, Friday met the Shell team returning to Port Harcourt as he was coming home on his motorcycle.

Friday stopped the Shell vehicles and asked what was going on. He was told to see the Shell Community Director in Port Harcourt but he replied that he could not do that because he was afraid for his safety and because he knew from experience that he would not be allowed inside the gate. Instead, Friday said he wanted to keep one of the vehicles and, apparently, he was allowed to keep the fire truck at his house.

On the 10th or 11th June the police came to Friday's house saying they wanted to remove the truck to Bori, the district centre. Friday refused and the police returned with the local government chairman who said he was willing to pay N500 to each of Friday's men because Friday's possession of the truck was affecting his job as chairman. They pleaded with Friday but he refused, saying he would only talk to Shell and not to middlemen. On the 15th June, the police came to the village with tear-gas and guns. The villagers ran to Friday who immediately surrendered himself to the police. With his hands up and outside his own house, he was shot in the legs and put into the boot of the police car by the Divisional Police Officer and the Area Commander. That was the last time Friday was seen alive.

For five days Friday's mother searched for her son. She was not allowed into the Shell compound in Port Harcourt but told to go to the nearby Rumuibekwe police station from where she was sent to the Shell clinic; here an Ogoni nurse told her that her son had died. Friday's body had apparently been deposited in the teaching hospital where she was told that she could only inspect the name in the mortuary register; the body could only be seen with police permission.

The story rings true in the light of other deaths of people who have challenged the oil companies. It was repeated in the Rivers State House of Assembly as reported on the local radio on Saturday the 30th June. A statement of apology from the police was quoted.

Another version of the story, that quotes Friday's mother, is consistent:

I don't know who called my son. He suddenly reappeared from his workplace and walked into the invading force with his hands raised in surrender. As he came he was shouting, "I am the one, didn't hijack any vehicle, Shell is owing me and I want my money." He cried as the police fired live bullets at him at close range. He was hit on his thighs several times. He fell down, bleeding profusely. He was carried from the ground by one of the police officers and dumped in the boot. I hired a car immediately and followed the police who were retreating after killing my child. When they noticed that we were following them, they stopped us. We diverted and monitored them up to the police station at Bori, Ogoni. I saw when Shell vehicles stopped and entered the police station. The police held brief talks with Shell and Khana local government officials.

From there, we moved to Port Harcourt. My son was crying in pains as they drove on. Some of the police had left the convoy remaining in some unmarked cars. It

was when they stopped over in Shell clinic in Rumukrushu, Port Harcourt that I missed my way. I went to the military hospital where they told me that there was no body like that. I visited all the government and Shell hospitals in Port Harcourt but I could not find my son. It was at the Shell hospital somebody I will not mention his name, told me that really the boy was bought there alive and after several secret talks with the medical personnel, they transferred him to the Mini-Okoro police station. At mini-Okoro, another reliable source told me that the boy was executed on Saturday and that the people were present during the shooting were the Divisional Crime Officer (DCO), Divisional Police Officer (DPO), Area Commander, one man nicknamed Ahoada and two others.

To confirm the source, I was told that the corpse was deposited at the mortuary of the university of Port Harcourt Teaching Hospital. I went there and saw the corpse of my son. I then went back to report all my ordeals to Hon. Emmanuel Deeyah, Commissioner that I want to see the Governor, Dr. Odili, since I voted for him. On 29 June 2001, Deeyah held a meeting with us in his office. Present at the meeting were our village head, elders, youth and the chairman Khana local government council, Hon. Letam Korsi. The Ogoni commissioner blamed those who attended for allowing the poor to die.



Up till now I am still waiting for the corpse of my son. I want to bury him . . . the police, Shell officials, and the village council are all responsible for my child's death. I will say these things anywhere, any day. Please quote me anywhere, I have read what Shell and the police are saying in the Nigerian media, they are all liars.

World leaders talk of terrorism and the need to deal with it. But from whence, I ask, does the terror come? It comes from the powerful. It is visited upon the weak and poor who have no power to resist it. Thousands of people, of all nationalities, lost their lives in the World Trade Centre on the 11th September 2001. Each one of those lives is of value and each loss inestimable. And yet the roots of terrorism will not be torn up until we, in the powerful West, can bring ourselves to value that one poor African life in Africa – Shell's one African – as being equal to our own.

Post Script

A demonstration in Bori had been planned for the Monday (18th June) following Friday's murder but the council chairman had brought in the Mobile Police to stop it. There was a heavy police presence on the Sunday and Monday.

On Friday the 23rd Shell met Ogoni councillors in the Presidential Hotel, Port Harcourt, to discuss the issue. Each was paid N10,000, far more than would be justified in Nigeria for expenses.

I was in Lagos on the 18th July. Just buying the newspapers impressed upon me how omnipresent is the issue of community suffering arising from the oil industry.

The Vanguard, July 18, 2001, Page 7: **Three die of drowning in A'bom:** Three children have so far died in Akwa Ibom by drowning in uncapped oil well belonging to Shell Producing Nigeria Ltd, Gov. Victor Attah has said. Addressing the World Conference of Mayors in Eket, Attah said that "Shell callously left uncapped wells in which three young children have so far drowned." Narrating the "evil side" of oil exploration in the area by Exxon-Mobil, Addax and Elf oil companies, he said that pollution, environmental degradation, terminal diseases and birth defects had affected many people in oil producing areas . . .

Same newspaper, same day, same page: **Oil spill: Strange illness hits Rivers community:** The Ogbodo Isioko community in Ikwere Local Government Area of Rivers, where (the) June 25 oil spill of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) occurred, have reported strange ailments among its people which they said had claimed four lives. The community said the spill, "which spread quite extensively on the only stream that provided (the) source of drinking water for the area" . . . Mr. Dona (sic) Boham, Shell's External Relations Manager, East, ruled out sabotage in the spillage . . .