

Who is responsible for the oil explosion in Nigeria?

By Jerry White
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Several hundred bodies, charred beyond recognition, were buried in a mass grave in southern Nigeria Monday after the explosion this weekend that killed at least 500 villagers. Many of the victims were scavenging for oil from a leaking pipeline. The tragedy occurred in Apawor, 180 miles southeast of Lagos, in the oil-rich Niger delta.

A nurse in Warri, where most of the victims were taken, said many of the dead were women and children. Some were still clutching bottles, plastic cups, funnels and cans they were using to collect fuel from the pipeline, which had been leaking for three days. The burnt body of one woman was found with her dead baby still strapped to her back. Many of the other victims were farmers and villagers sleeping in their homes when the explosion occurred.

Witnesses say people had been soaked by the gushing oil and were engulfed in flames when the fuel ignited. Others were trapped in a ditch where a pool of petrol had collected. A patch of land the size of a soccer field was charred as the fire followed the flow of volatile liquid.

Poorly equipped hospitals and health centers in the remote region were inundated with the dead and injured and were forced to turn many away. The death toll is expected to rise above 500 as many of the injured are not expected to survive.

Nigeria's military ruler, General Abulsalami Abubakar, visited the site Monday and said no compensation would be paid to the relatives of the victims. He declared that the damage to the pipeline was an act of sabotage, echoing the claims of representatives of the Pipeline and Products Marketing Company (PPMC), the state-owned firm that operates the pipeline.

Company officials said that the fire was started by

"tools used by saboteurs." But other reports say it was ignited by someone lighting a cigarette, or by a spark from a motorcycle.

The disaster highlights the staggering social crisis in Nigeria. The country is the world's sixth largest producer of crude oil, with an output of about 2 million barrels a day. While this has produced huge profits for multinational corporations and the ruling military clique in Lagos, ordinary Nigerians face perpetual fuel shortages.

Most of the country's oil is exported, generating 90 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange revenues. The group around General Sani Abacha, who held power until his death last June, siphoned off millions of dollars from the oil industry, causing vast disruptions in oil production and refining. This has continued under General Abubakar.

Reports of "sabotage" have been growing since the country's poorly maintained refineries began falling behind the demand for petrol. Long lines in towns and cities are commonplace and the lack of petrol, except on the black market, leads to hundreds of vehicles waiting at filling stations to fuel up, sometimes for days. Under such conditions, a leak attracts hundreds of Nigerians seeking free fuel, regardless of the risk.

There have been similar incidents in other parts of Africa. More than 30 Kenyans died in July as they collected petrol from an overturned tanker lorry. In Cameroon, about 120 died as they gathered fuel at the scene of a railway accident.

Nigeria's oil-producing region has in recent years been the center of political conflict. Earlier this month protesters from the Ijaw tribe took over several oil pumping stations, stopping the flow of about a third of Nigeria's oil exports. Their demand was for more of the country's oil wealth to flow back to their communities.

Since the early 1990s there have been repeated mass protests against the oil companies and the government. The central target has been Shell Oil, which operates the largest exploration and production enterprise in a joint venture with the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Since the 1960s Shell has made \$30 billion in oil revenues there, while 7 million inhabitants of the delta, mostly fishermen and subsistence farmers, have been devastated by environmental damage and exploitation.

Gas flares from oil wells, burning 24 hours a day, cover nearby villages with thick soot and produce acid rain. Each year there are an average of 700 oil spills, ruining water supplies, farmland and fisheries. The companies have also opposed proposals to bury their pipelines, because it is far cheaper to lay them over-ground, even if they are located in close proximity to villages and agricultural lands. While the companies blame "sabotage" for oil leaks, most are caused by corrosion, equipment failure, pipe ruptures and blowouts on the outmoded and poorly maintained equipment.

Protests by hundreds of thousands of Ogoni people, an ethnic minority which inhabits the region, led to the suspension of Shell production in 1993. The major oil companies, complaining of the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars, urged the government to intervene. Human rights activists say that Shell Oil colluded with the government in the state repression that followed.

General Abacha dispatched soldiers who murdered scores of Ogoni villagers in an effort to crush the protest movement. The Lagos government sought to foment ethnic conflicts, particularly between the Ogoni and Andoni peoples. Abacha also arrested and framed up Nigerian author Ken Saro-Wiwa, the leader of the protest movement. Ignoring international protests, Abacha had Ken Sari-Wiwa executed in November 1995 along with eight codefendants.

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