

# Lives Uprooted by Oil:

## *Indigenous Peoples Rally to Resist Exploitation*

BY LANI LEE

From the meandering rivers and mangroves of Africa to the diverse tropical rainforests of the Amazon basin, the oil industry implants seismic lines, builds pipelines and dumps toxic waste in pristine ecosystems. Petroleum, which is commonly referred to as the world's "black gold," has a high demand in the global market. Consequently, the oil industry has increasingly resorted to exploitation of poor people in the most resource-rich regions in the world. Both the environments and indigenous people of Africa and South America in particular have suffered from the cost of the world's dependence on oil.

Transnational corporations enjoy unregulated privatization of natural resources. Led by multinational organizations like the World Bank, the oil industry targets less developed, politically and economically vulnerable regions like Nigeria, West Africa, Columbia and Ecuador. The imposition of massive industrial projects on indigenous peoples — without their consent and often against their will — has led to a loss of control over their own development as a people.

Indigenous communities are leading the battle to defend their rights and protect their homelands in the face of unregulated privatization. They have created cooperatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), forged allies in Congress, filed lawsuits, blocked oil roads, and shut down wells, rigs and drilling sites. This activism and solidarity of indigenous peoples echoes a rising call for Northern countries to wake up and take notice. This article is dedicated to those who have resisted big oil interests and continue to serve as catalysts for social change in local communities and around the world.

### **NIGERIA AND THE Ogoni PEOPLE**

Nigeria is the largest oil producer in Africa and the 11th largest producer globally. The country generates roughly 2.5 million barrels per day and is a major supplier to Western Europe and the United States. While Nigeria's

proven oil reserves are some 35.2 billion barrels, the government plans to expand to 40 billion by 2010.<sup>1</sup> Most of these reserves are found along the coastal region and Niger River Delta, home of the third-largest mangrove forest in the world.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian economy is heavily dependent on oil revenues. Nigerian oil production provides 80 percent of government revenues and accounts for 95 percent of exports. However, Nigeria's oil wealth has not trickled down to the people. The

World Bank estimates that 80 percent of oil revenues accrue to only 1 percent of Nigeria's general population. Despite the country's oil revenues, more than 70 percent of the population lives in poverty.<sup>3</sup> More than anything, the oil industry has had a negative effect on the lives of its citizens.

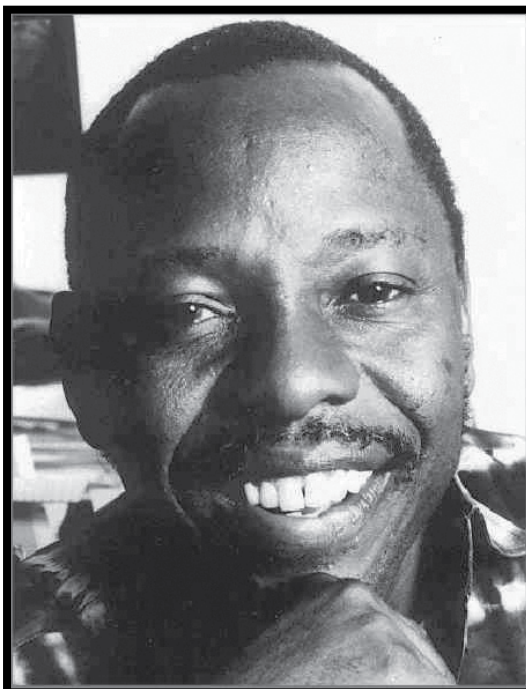
The Ogoni nation is located in the ecologically rich Niger Delta. This region contains abundant wildlife, forests, agricultural land and more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa. Since Royal Dutch Shell began extracting oil from the delta over 60 years ago, the company has shown little concern for the environment or the 500,000 Ogoni people.<sup>4</sup>

Oil production activities such as flaring, oil spills, construction of infrastructure, and waste dumping have brought the Niger Delta to near collapse. Gas flares are elevated vertical stacks found in oil wells and refiner-

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"I harbour the hope ...that in encouraging the Ogoni people to a belief in their ability to revitalise their dying society, I have started a trend which will peacefully liberate many peoples in Africa and lead eventually to political and economic reform and social justice." - Ken Saro-Wiwa

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Ken Saro-Wiwa, leader of MOSOP



Indigenous Ogoni pay tribute to murdered/martyred activist Ken Saro Wiwa, who led opposition to Shell Oil's destruction of the Nigerian Delta and was hanged with eight other Ogoni activists by the military dictatorship. Ogoniland, Nigeria.  
(Photo by Gopal <artactivism.members.gn.apc.org>)

ies that burn 24 hours a day. The constant intense heat and gasses released from the flares destroy crops and cause acid rain in the Niger Delta. Oil spills occur because most of Shell's pipelines have not been replaced since the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> These rusty and poorly maintained pipelines have contaminated the Niger Delta's drinking water supplies. Pipe explosions and leakages are common and kill thousands. The 1992 oil blow, in the village of Botem, lasted for one week and represents 40 percent of Shell's total worldwide spills.<sup>6</sup>

In response, the Ogoni waged nonviolent resistance against Shell to reclaim their lands and protect what little remains of their endangered environments. In 1990, they launched the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) to put a stop to the ecological terrorism. Led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP became an umbrella of mass mobilization of Nigerian youth groups, women's associations, professionals and traditional rulers.<sup>7</sup> Together, they drafted the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which calls for nonviolent action to promote the political, economic and environmental control of the Ogoni people. The document was submitted to the Nigerian government and charged Shell with "full responsibility for the genocide of the Ogoni."<sup>8</sup>

In January 1993, 300,000 Ogoni peacefully protested against Shell's destruction of the Niger Delta. This marked the largest demonstration ever organized against an oil company. In April, a Shell contractor began bulldozing farmland in preparation for the Rumueke-Bomu pipeline. Ten thousand Ogoni protested the construction. The construction company called government troops to the site to respond to the Ogoni demonstration. Eleven people were injured as a result of open fire.

A few months later, over 100 Ogoni were killed in the town of Kaa and 8,000 were made homeless.<sup>9</sup>

In 1994, Saro-Wiwa, the MOSOP president, was arrested with eight other Ogoni leaders on fabricated charges, and accused of murder by the Nigerian military. Saro-Wiwa was awarded the 1994 Right Livelihood Award, and was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. The next year, Saro-Wiwa and the other leaders

were executed. According to evidence found in 1995, Shell had bribed the witnesses in the trial to testify against Saro-Wiwa. The executions provoked international condemnation of Shell. Nevertheless, the U.S. Senate bill that would have embargoed Nigerian oil died for lack of Senate sponsors.<sup>10</sup> In 1996, hundreds gathered at an Ogoni Day rally in the town of Bori. Soldiers fired tear gas and ammunition into the crowd killing four youths and injuring many.<sup>11</sup> Military actions spread terror and turned thousands of Ogoni into refugees. Yet, massacres and executions have only hardened the resolve of communities to put an end to oil production.

In the following years after Saro-Wiwa's death, demonstrations occurred daily all over the Niger Delta. The Ijaw community, whose population totals 12 million, joined the Ogoni and drafted the Kaiama Declaration, which demanded the immediate withdrawal of oil companies and military forces. In 1998, Ijaw groups took control of 20 oil stations, cutting Nigeria's oil production of 2 million barrels a day by one-third. Since 1993, Shell has spent millions of dollars on advertising and public relations to save its reputation.<sup>12</sup>

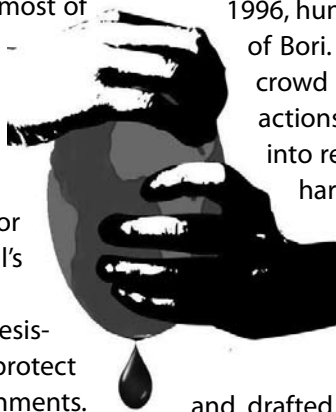
In a recent visit to UC Berkeley to express his opposition to a proposed British Petroleum/UC Berkeley collaboration (see page 42), Nigerian human rights activist Omoyele Sowore related that women play a prominent role in anti-oil exploitation protests. One of their frequent actions is to remove their clothes and occupy oil rigs. In the Nigerian culture, a naked woman sends a message of shame to men who, by implication of her nakedness, have done something horrible to her and her community.

## RESISTANCE IN COLOMBIA AND ECUADOR

The most intense resistance to new oil development thus far has arisen from the native community of 5,000 U'wa who

*Ogoni is the land  
The people, Ogoni  
The agony of trees dying  
In ancestral farmlands  
Streams polluted weeping  
Filth into murky rivers  
It is the poisoned air  
Coursing the luckless lungs  
Of dying children  
Ogoni is the dream  
Breaking the looping chain  
Around the drooping neck  
Of a shell-shocked land*

(Ken Saro-Wiwa)







A protest against Texaco in Lago Agrio, Ecuador.

live in Eastern Colombia. Pipelines in Colombia have spilled over 1.7 million barrels of crude oil into the soil, rivers and sacred lands, devastating the livelihood of these people. Since 1992, the U'wa have nonviolently resisted Occidental Petroleum Corporation (Oxy) from the Samore block. The U'wa Defense Working Group (UDWG) was formed in 1997 from a coalition of NGOs. In 1999, UDWG organized the International Week of Action for the U'wa, which included widespread protests at Oxy headquarters. The following year, the Colombian court ordered Oxy to halt all construction on the Gibraltar 1 drill site. Oxy quickly appealed the injunction. In response, the U'wa joined forces again, and this time formed a blockade around the drilling rigs. Oxy silenced their rallying cries for peace and justice by ordering the demonstrators to leave and installing landmines to keep protestors off the site.<sup>15</sup>

In nearby Ecuador, the 310-mile Trans-Ecuadorian Pipeline was completed in 1972 by a Texaco-led consortium. The pipeline served as the primary conduit for oil extraction from the Ecuadorian Amazon, also known as the Oriente.<sup>16</sup> The Oriente consists of over 32 million acres of diverse tropical rainforest. Oil spills from the pipeline have poured an estimated 18.5 million gallons of crude oil into the Amazon River, 1.5 times the amount from the Exxon Valdez spill. Additionally, Texaco has built over 200 wells and 1,000 toxic pits in the rainforest, which have generated more than 3.2 gallons of waste each day. Other ecological impacts of the oil industry have included: logging, clear cutting for roads, and shockwaves from seismic testing that kill aquatic life and threaten animal habitats. Hunter-gatherer communities that depend on natural resources and live in the forest face major health problems from bathing in contaminated rivers and inhaling vapors. These issues attracted more media attention in 1992, when 1,500 natives from Ecuador's Amazon rainforest walked 140 miles to Quito, the country's capital. This march served as a powerful moment and symbol of peaceful nonviolent

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## Texaco has built over 200 wells and 1,000 toxic pits in the rainforest

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resistance, and created an inspiring, deeply resonating energy within the movement. As a result, actions spread and the government began to take notice. A greater movement to unite all 12 indigenous groups, resulted in a massive well-organized protest that shut down the country for two weeks in June 1994. The mobilization proved successful when the revised Constitution in 1998 included the protesters' demands and acknowledged Ecuador as a "pluricultural" and "multiethnic" state. The new Constitution called for the recognition of and respect for the sacred ancestral lands of indigenous groups.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this accomplishment, oil extraction continued, and nonviolent resistance became subject to violent opposition. On the eve of the "March for Peace and Defense of the Collective Rights of all Nationalities of the Amazon" in 2003, several Sarayacu villagers and protesters were attacked and killed. An alliance of five indigenous nationalities, representing

over 30,000 rainforest residents, filed a lawsuit against ChevronTexaco. In October of 2006, attorney Steve Donziger and Director of Communications for Amazon Watch, Simeon Tegel, spoke at UC Berkeley Boalt Law School about the historical trial. The lawsuit, *Aguinda v. ChevronTexaco*, represents the first time in history that tribal communities have forced

a multinational company to clean up their mess and has the potential to benefit millions of other people who have been victims of human rights abuses by private corporations. In March of this year, the Ecuador judge ordered that the final phase of the trial, which includes a damage assessment, be completed in 120 days. The decision to the \$6 billion class-action lawsuit is expected early 2008.

## INDIGENOUS UNITY

As the indigenous peoples of Africa and South America have illustrated, the connection between the assault on the environment and the assault on human rights is inseparable. Unfortunately, oil companies operate under an ethic of production and profit, not fulfillment of indigenous peoples' rights or environmental justice. Indigenous groups, like all people, have the right to determine their own future and be informed about the impacts of oil exploration and development on their land. Through both education and inclusion in decision-making processes, indigenous people can make the choice about getting involved in petroleum projects, protect their natural resources, preserve their farmlands and profit from trade. Most importantly, they can live a life without violence, fear, corruption and the false promises of corporate industry.

The resistance movements in this article share two core principles, nonviolence and solidarity. The Ogoni, Ijaw, U'wa and Sarayacu are linked by the same essential struggle against an asymmetrical system of development. Tribes that once didn't get along are now united in a single movement.

When neighboring communities march together in solidarity, the anti-exploitation movement gains momentum worldwide. Hand in hand, the chorus of chanting voices grows louder and the legacy of nonviolent resistance and solidarity lives on. Although there have been tragic deaths and brutality, protests against oil industries remain nonviolent and peaceful. The aims of such protests are simple: to inspire equitable solutions to our energy needs and respect human lives.

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#### Resources:

Amazon Watch:  
<[www.amazonwatch.org](http://www.amazonwatch.org)>  
Amazon Alliance for Indigenous and Traditional Peoples of the Amazon Basin:  
<[www.amazonalliance.org](http://www.amazonalliance.org)>  
Art Not Oil: <[www.artnotoil.org.uk](http://www.artnotoil.org.uk)>  
Chevron Toxico:  
<[www.chevrontoxico.com](http://www.chevrontoxico.com)>  
Corporate Watch:  
<[www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)>  
Friends of the Earth: <[www.foe.org](http://www.foe.org)>  
Project Underground:  
<[www.moles.org](http://www.moles.org)>  
Oil Watch: <[www.oilwatch.org](http://www.oilwatch.org)>  
Rainforest Action Network:  
<[www.ran.org](http://www.ran.org)>

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- 1 Pan, Esther. China, Africa, and Oil. Council on Foreign Relations. Background. 12 January 2006.
- 2 Gedicks, Al. Resource Rebels: Native Challenges to Mining and Oil Corporations. "Big Oil, the Environment and Human Rights." South End Press, 2001. 43.
- 3 Kretzmann, Steve and Nooruddin, I. Drilling into Debt: An Investigation into the Relationship Between Debt and Oil. Oil Change International, 2005.
- 4 Douglas, Oronto and Okanta, Ike. "Ogoni People of Nigeria vs. Big Oil." Mander, Jerry and Tauli, Corpuz, Victoria, Eds. Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization. International Forum on Globalization, 2006. 129.
- 5 Douglas, 130.
- 6 Gedicks, 45.
- 7 Douglas, 131.
- 8 Gedicks, 46.
- 9 The Ogoni Struggle - A Project Underground Report. 1996. <[www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/motherlode/shell/timeline.html](http://www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/motherlode/shell/timeline.html)>
- 10 Gedicks, 47-48.
- 11 All for Shell Timeline. <[www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/motherlode/shell/timeline.html](http://www.moles.org/ProjectUnderground/motherlode/shell/timeline.html)>.
- 12 Rowell, Andres. "Crude Operators: The Future of the Oil Industry." The Ecologists. Vol. 27, No.3, May/June 1997. 105.
- 15 Gedicks, 55-63.
- 16 "10 Controversial Pipeline Projects." Drillsbits & Tailings. Vol. 5, No. 10, 19 June 2000. Project Underground.
- 17 Gedicks, 71-75.

#### Eriemu Gas Flare

— George Osodi, Niger Delta, 2004, Courtesy of Art Not Oil

