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January 1, 2006

## **Blood Flows With Oil in Poor Nigerian Villages**

By LYDIA POLGREEN

**Correction Appended**

OBIOKU, [Nigeria](#) - At first glance, it is hard to imagine anyone fighting over this place.

Approached by a creek, the only way to get here, a day's journey by dugout canoe from the nearest town, it presents itself as a collection of battered shacks teetering on a steadily eroding beach.

On Sunday morning, the village children shimmy out of their best clothes after church and head to a muddy puddle to collect water. Their mothers use the murky liquid to cook whatever soup they can muster from the meager catch of the day.

Yet for months a pitched battle has been fought between communities that claim authority over this village and the right to control what lies beneath its watery ground: a potentially vast field of crude oil that has caught the attention of a major energy company.

The conflict has left dozens dead and wounded, sent hundreds fleeing their homes and roiled this once quiet part of the Niger Delta. It has also laid bare the desperate struggle of impoverished communities to reap crumbs from the lavish banquet the oil boom has laid in this oil-rich yet grindingly poor corner of the globe.

"This region is synonymous with oil, but also with unbelievable poverty," said Anyakwee Nsirimovu, executive director of Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in the Niger Delta. That combination is an inevitable recipe for bloodshed and misery, he said. "The world depends on their oil, but for the people of the Niger Delta oil is more of a curse than a blessing."

Africa is in the midst of an oil boom, with companies and governments pouring \$50 billion into projects that may double the continent's oil output in the next decade.

In the world's thirst for oil and the United States' efforts to obtain it outside the troubled Middle East, African oil has become essential. Africa is expected to provide the United States with a quarter of its oil supply in the next decade, compared with about 15 percent now, and much of it will come from the Gulf of Guinea, where the Niger Delta sits.

But much of that oil will come from places like Obioku, and with it a tangled and often bloody web of conflict marked by poverty and a near abdication of responsibility by government.

Even though Nigeria elected a democratic government in 1999, which raised hopes for the long-suffering delta region, almost none of the enormous wealth the oil creates reaches places like this. The isolation of Obioku is total. With no fast boats available, the nearest health center or clinic is a day's journey away. No telephone service exists here. Radio brings the only news of the world outside. Nothing hints that the people here live in a nation enjoying the profits of record-high oil prices.

"It is like we don't exist, as far as government is concerned," said Worikuma Idaulambo, chairman of Obioku's council of chiefs.

Nigeria is a longstanding OPEC member that exported nearly \$30 billion of oil in 2004, the United States Department of Energy said. Nigeria sends 13 percent of revenues from its states back, a hefty sum for the underdeveloped ones where oil is produced. Much of that is siphoned off by corrupt regional officials who often pocket the money or waste it on lavish projects that do little, if anything, for ordinary people.

A result has been a violent struggle over the jobs, schools and other aid that oil companies have offered to encourage local residents to cooperate. Here in Obioku, as in many towns in the delta, an oil company, in this case a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell, has brought the only signs of modernity. In 1998, Shell bought the rights to drill for oil near a small fishing settlement at the edge of Obioku, no more than a handful of rough shelters made of grass and wood.

Shell signed agreements with the chiefs of Obioku and with leaders in the nearest town, Nembe-Bassambiri, to help develop Obioku. In time, Shell built a water tower, gave the village a generator and built a primary school. In return, the village agreed to allow Shell and its contractors to work freely.

For years Shell did nothing with the field. Then, early last year, a Shell contractor arrived to begin work, and trouble started.

Officials in a nearby town, Odioma, laid claim to the land, and demanded that the oil company pay tribute if it wanted to drill.

"This is Odioma land," said Daniel I. L. Orumiegha-Bari, a member of Odioma's council of chiefs. "It belongs to us. Anyone claiming otherwise is an interloper wanting to revise hundreds of years of our history."

Chiefs in Nembe-Bassambiri, who were receiving payments on the premise that the land was theirs, rejected Odioma's claim.

Human rights and environmental groups have long criticized the practices of Shell, the oldest and largest of Nigeria's oil producers. As a result of a stinging internal report in 2003 that said Shell, whether intentionally or not, "creates, feeds into or exacerbates conflict," the company revamped its community relations strategy. Shell immediately withdrew from the Obioku area and referred the dispute to local government authorities to resolve.

In this serpentine labyrinth of rivers and creeks, where fishermen eke out a living casting homemade nets, who owned Obioku was academic to the chiefs of Odioma and Nembe-Bassambiri until Shell arrived. But with the sudden promise of payment, the dispute escalated, first in increasingly belligerent letters among the three villages.

Words soon gave way to action, and blood began to flow into the rivers and creeks. In February, a boat filled with local government councilors on a mission to broker a deal among the feuding communities was attacked, and a dozen people were killed.

Officials in Nembe-Bassambiri blamed a militant youth group in Odioma for the slaughter. The group is believed to be involved in bunkering: stealing oil by breaking into pipelines.

As is common here, group members had been hired by an oil company contractor to provide security on the waterways, chiefs in Odioma and other villages said. Such contracts are often a way to buy cooperation from youths who would otherwise attack oil installations and harass workers.

Contending that it sought to arrest the members of the youth group, a unit of the Nigerian military known as the Joint Task Force, charged with security in the Niger Delta, went to Odioma on Feb. 19.

Thinking that the task force was coming to help them, Odioma's chiefs had gathered in the village king's palace to receive it. But shots were fired, and the chiefs scattered.

"We thought they came in peace," said Mr. Orumiegha-Bari, the Odioma chief. "But they destroyed our village."

The army flattened Odioma, residents said, leaving behind a barren moonscape covered with a carpet of ash, broken glass and burned concrete where an idyllic village once stood. At least 17 people died in the raid, including a 12-year-old boy called Lucky, Mr. Orumiegha-Bari said.

Ayebatari Silgbanibo had been sitting in the tiny office of his computer business, which he started with a grant from Shell, when the gunfire started. "I didn't want to leave my computer because it is all I have," Mr. Silgbanibo, 22, said. "But I was afraid."

When he returned, his computer and printer had been destroyed. He is a fisherman now, like his father and most of the men in this village, earning about a dollar a day. The

computer, which he received because Odioma has its own oil wells, apart from Obioku, was supposed to lift him out of generations of poverty.

"How can I ever buy a new computer?" he said. "It is impossible."

Brig. Gen. Elias Zamani, commander of the Joint Task Force, said his soldiers opened fire on Odioma only after being fired upon. "They were lying in wait for the arrival of our troops," he said of the youth group.

He said some houses had been destroyed when stray bullets struck buildings where petroleum was stored. The army disputes the death toll, saying army officials asked to see bodies and graves and could not find any. But a report on the attack by Amnesty International in November concluded that the destruction seemed to have had specific targets, destroying the houses of the village king and other officials.

And yet, Mr. Orumiegha-Bari said he was grateful that it was the Joint Task Force that had attacked his village and not their neighbors in Nembe-Bassambiri.

"If Bassambiri people came first you wouldn't have seen anybody here to talk to," the chief said. "They would have slaughtered every last man."

The village has asked the army to stay to protect residents from their neighbors.

"We don't like that they are here, but it is better that they stay," Mr. Orumiegha-Bari said. The arrival of the soldiers, village leaders said, is the first time any federal government representative has had a presence in Odioma.

It is hard to say who is to blame for the violence that has wracked this pocket of Nigeria. Some villagers and human rights groups blame the oil companies and their contractors, which pay for economic development and employ youths, creating an incentive for communal violence. Still others blame the federal, state and local governments, which collect and distribute millions of dollars in the names of local residents yet never seem to produce much benefit.

"These conflicts are a direct result of the abandonment of these communities by their government," Mr. Nsirimovu said. "If their government took care of them they wouldn't be fighting over these little scraps and rewards from the oil companies."

Federal officials acknowledge that corruption is a big problem but point out that even if Nigeria is having an oil boom, it does not amount to great wealth per capita. In 2004, after costs were deducted, Nigeria's oil money amounted about 50 cents per day for each of the country's 130 million people, they said.

Shell officials defended their role in the crisis, saying they withdrew from the area as soon as a conflict over ownership arose. They said it was primarily the job of Nigeria's elected officials to develop the country, but added that in addition to taxes and royalties,

they contributed 3 percent of their annual operating budget to a fund to help develop the delta. In 2004, the company's contribution to that fund was nearly \$70 million.

"Government is so removed that they see the oil companies as being the nearest government to them," said Don S. Bonham, a spokesman for Shell in the oil capital of Port Harcourt. "The expectations of government have not been met."

The communities fighting over the oil fields are in Bayelsa State, which produces a third of Nigeria's oil and has an annual budget of more than half a billion dollars to spend on its three million people. But most of it goes to white elephants like a mansion for the governor and his deputy.

"This is what we eat," said Paulgba Tekikuma, an Obioku resident, gesturing to a small bowl half-full of tiny fish and crustaceans she would mix with milled cassava. "The water, sometimes it get the babies sick when they drink. But we no get any other."

Corruption is largely to blame. The state's governor, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha, was arrested in London on money laundering charges in September, then fled to Nigeria, where he enjoyed immunity even from prosecutors, in November. He is suspected of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars from the state since he was elected in 1999. He has since been impeached, and as a result charged with corruption and money laundering in Nigeria. After an inquiry in 2005, Amnesty International concluded, "As with many violent disputes within communities in the Niger Delta, access to oil resources is at the root of the Odioma incident."

Mr. Nsirimovu, the human rights advocate, said the underdevelopment of the region both caused and exacerbated the violence. Until real development begins, "blood will flow freely in the Niger Delta," he said. "Mark my words."

*An article Jan. 1, about the struggle by impoverished communities in the Niger delta to reap any benefits from the oil boom misstated the amount of money the oil industry generates for Nigeria. It is 50 cents each day for each of the country's 130 million people, not 50 cents per capita over all in 2004.*