

features

# When Blessing Becomes a Curse in the Niger Delta

By Betty Abah

*The other day I saw a supervisor of Wilbros, an oil servicing firm operating in the area. I asked him why they were not giving any jobs to the women. They had just given some casual jobs to a few boys. He looked at us and replied that indeed there were jobs for the women. I asked him, "What jobs?" He put his hands on his crotch and said "This is the job for the women."*

—Madam Adeline Gilbert, Woman Leader

**Severely Scarred Source of Survival.** With their children in tow, the women survey the destruction wrought by the massive oil spill that was followed by an uncontrollable fire. They used to fish in this part of the Oya Lake.

Photo from Environmental Rights Action (ERA)

If injustice had not existed and natural blessings had been left unabused, Cilia Neberi would be one of the happiest and most comfortable women to grace the earth's surface. But then, it is a world where the reverse is the case. With decades of oil-related anguish behind her, the middle-aged mother of four is now dead and gone.

Cilia lived in Ikarama, an oil-producing community in the Niger Delta where Shell and Agip carry out large-scale drilling activities. Like many women farmers in

Ikarama, Cilia was the bread winner of her family. Like many other people too, she and her family were severely threatened by the oil spills. For several months, her house was like an island, surrounded by dark, slimy and nauseating substances from one of the ruptured pipes of Agip, an oil facility that is stationed right at the centre of her community.

A slim woman with an oak-like will, Cilia joined a group of women in the community to protest such environmental degradation

by Agip's unregulated and insensitive drilling activities. When their cries and pleas fell on deaf ears, Cilia and her husband devised a means of safe-guarding themselves, especially their four young children. In the morning they headed to her in-laws' house and returned in the evenings to simply sleep the menace away.

But the menace caught up with Cilia, who eventually complained of body aches and nausea that left her unable to work. The family had no money that could have given her quality medical help on time. The Agip-sponsored clinic was also useless. Contrary to its press releases, the clinic was only inhabited by reptiles. Cilia was later taken to the General Hospital at Yenagoa but she succumbed in just a couple of weeks.

Cilia is just one of the several cases experienced throughout the Niger Delta

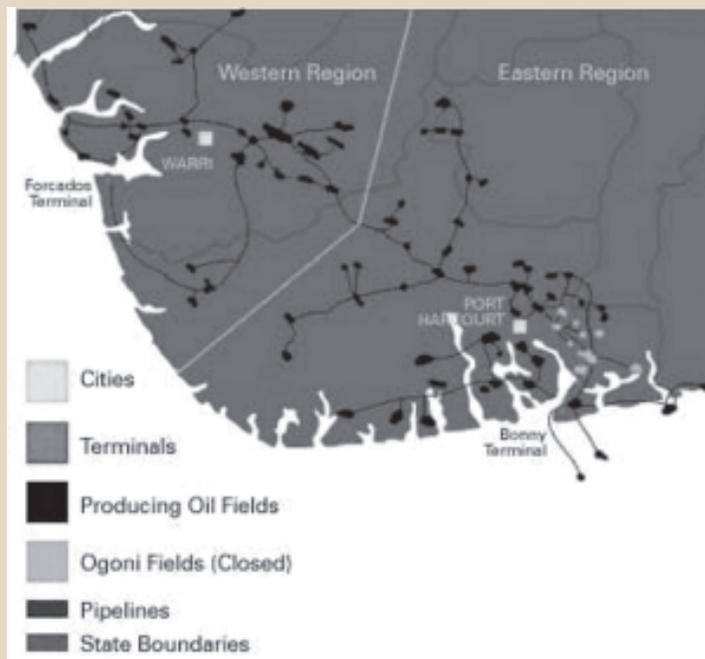
where a natural endowment of oil has become a grievous curse. The communities constantly grapple with the consequences of oil spills, gas flares and other menaces arising from unregulated explorative activities of the international oil companies.

Many women in these subsistence communities bear the burdensome task of caring for their families, protecting them from harsh pollution. The rate of cases of cancer, infertility, leukemia, bronchitis, asthma, still-births, deformed babies and other pollution-related ailments are unusually high in this region. From Ikarama to Akaraolu to Imiringi, women are bruised and dying.

As one farmer, Marthy Berebo shared, "If I am to undress before you, you will see the extent of the toll this pollution has taken on my body. The whole of my body is racked

## The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region is a coastal community facing the Atlantic Ocean, forming approximately seven per cent of the country's land mass. It covers five main states in the region namely Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Akwa-Ibom and Cross Rivers. The Delta has been inhabited by the Ijaw, Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ikwere, Isoko, Andoni, Ndokwa, Kwale, Efik, Ibibio and Annag peoples. Since the successful discovery of an oil well in Oloibirin in 1956, the Delta has been eyed and explored by various multinational petroleum companies. The oil industry is responsible for over 80 per cent of Nigeria's wealth. Despite such huge earnings, it is said that much of these proceed to only one per cent of the population. In addition to the environmental degradation and community displacement caused by the oil companies in the region, the corruption over oil revenues has been the source of various conflicts over the years.



**Sources:** ERA, Amnesty International (2009). "Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta." URL: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/021/2009/en/3be47dff-af1f-4c8e-b7a6-960d229644f7/afr440212009en.pdf> and Wikipedia (nd). "Niger Delta" URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger\\_Delta](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger_Delta) and Urhobo Historical Society (nd). "Map of the Niger delta Showing Oil Fields and Pipelines." URL: [http://www.waado.org/images/Maps/in\\_oildeltamap.gif](http://www.waado.org/images/Maps/in_oildeltamap.gif)

with aches.” Charity Seiba, 66-year old mother of 10 also said, “The same oil companies that sustain this country are killing us. This is the pain with which we have to live.”

Ikarama, a predominantly fishing and farming community of 10,000 people, also ranks as one of the most polluted communities in the Niger Delta. Settled along Taylor Creek, Ikarama is host to both the Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC) and Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). Shell’s pipes that link the Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States all pass through Ikarama. Shell’s Okordia Manifold is also situated in Ikarama.

It is assumed that by hosting big international companies like Shell, communities flourish. But the contrary happens to Ikarama, as it finds itself in a deep and dark pool of poverty. The roads have yet to be paved, as promised by the company while the lives of people are becoming worse, with their livelihoods destroyed by the frequent oil spills.

Alili Ziah is a widow with seven children. Before, she could still provide for them through fishing but now that the water has been contaminated, her family has been forced to depend on other people’s charity. “Whenever I set traps and I go to inspect, they are soaked in crude oil,” she remarked.

Like Ikarama, Imiringi has been hosting several of Shell’s gas flaring sites since 1972. The health implications arising from the open, poisonous flames are enormous. People who live nearby complain of rashes on the skin, redness of the eyes and other complications. Contamination is quite likely since women usually dry their local staple, *kpoko garri* near these gas flaring sites. Women’s reproductive health has also been affected, as seen with the rising number of cases of infertility and birth deformities.

## Shelled Fishes

by Biobele Ademe

Fishing has been badly affected by the presence of the extractive industry in this community. In those days before Shell came to our land, when our parents bail their ponds, we used to get several buckets or baskets of fishes.

The story is different these days due to the slick of oil and other chemicals from the gas flare that has continued to pollute the ponds, swamps and creeks. Even the few fishes that we manage to catch often smell of crude oil.

In most cases, one will observe varying degrees of oil slick or other shiny matter on the surface of these ponds, burrow pits and even our creek, the Kolocreek.

We often notice that the oil companies sometimes allow their waste petroleum products and even crude oil that escape from their pipelines to flow freely into our creek. Due to the several construction works, these companies disturb the routes through which the fishes swim into our ponds. These fishes are now blocked by heavy heaps of mud.

Fishes find their way into the ponds during the rainy season and when the swamps are flooded. This is also their breeding period. We have studied these patterns over the years.

The various distortions on the topography by the oil companies have adversely affected us in many ways.

Yes, in those days we used to have up to ten or more buckets of fish when we bail the ponds. We left the ponds for two years before bailing. But these days, even if one leaves it for five years before bailing, one cannot get anything from the ponds. We are thus denied a veritable source of income. We now spend our hard earned money to buy imported frozen fish.

Apart from denying us of our fishing rights, we can no longer take a bath in the river. When one dives into the creek, one comes out with an oily body.

We cannot even drink the water from the creek. Shell provided a borehole in our community but the water from the borehole is not fit for human consumption. When one fetches water and keeps it for a while, one will notice a thin silver-like colour over the surface and rusty sediments in the bucket.

As noted by farmer Margaret Amos, “Since 1972, our crop yields have started depreciating. Then, as a young girl, I noticed that our crops such as cocoyam, cassava and plantain grew more luxuriantly and when we harvested them, we got bountiful yields. But all that is now history.”

Oil has been Nigeria’s lifeblood since the late 1950s, when Shell had its first successful oil well in Oloibiri in the Bayelsa State in 1956. Eighty per cent of the country’s wealth is

kilometres of flow lines and 400 kilometres of pipelines. It has 349 drilling sites. At the height of its operations, Shell produced one million barrels of crude oil daily. This figure has been reduced with the attacks of militant groups in the last few years. But given the relative stability in this volatile region, there are prospects that the figure would once more increase.

Yet oil companies have very little to show in terms of its contributions to the

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derived from oil while 90 per cent of revenues come from oil-related businesses. About 50 per cent of Nigeria’s gross domestic product (GDP), 80 per cent of budgetary revenues and 95 per cent of foreign exchange earnings come from oil that is drilled at the Niger Delta.

Ten per cent of its crude oil is directed to the United States (US). According to the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Nigeria is the eighth biggest exporter of petroleum in the world.

Shell is the most dominant and oldest players in the industry that also includes big names like Agip, Mobil, Chevron and ELF. In fact, it accounts for half of the total oil production in Nigeria. In both Bayelsa and Rivers states alone, Shell’s seismic lines cover 56,000 kilometres. The company has 7,000



## Flaring the Air

Although forbidden by national laws, the burning of unwanted gas continues with Nigeria contributing 23 billion cubic meters out of the 150 to 170 billion cubic meters of gas released in the atmosphere yearly. The latter amount is equivalent to the emissions of vehicles in the United Kingdom, France and Germany combined. Despite the 2005 Nigerian court injunction, Shell still flared 600 million cubic metres of gas in this country. In 2001, the amount it flared equaled to 40 per cent of gas consumption on the entire continent of Africa.

**Source:** John Donnelly (2007). “Russia top offender in gas-flare emissions: US study uses satellite images for findings.” URL: [http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2007/06/21/russia\\_top\\_offender\\_in\\_gas\\_flare\\_emissions/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/europe/articles/2007/06/21/russia_top_offender_in_gas_flare_emissions/) and Shelltruth.org (nd). “Gas Flaring-Nigeria.” URL: [http://www.shelltruth.com/case1\\_e.html](http://www.shelltruth.com/case1_e.html) Photo from Shellguilty.com

communities' development. In fact, they have merely subjected communities to more poverty and disease because of their unregulated means of polluting the land, water and air. In the Niger Delta alone, there are more than a hundred gas flare sites. It has been estimated that 13 per cent of the annual global gas flared or about 23 billion cubic meters out of 168 billion cubic meters come from Nigeria. It is said that with this unabated flaring, about US\$15 million worth of gas is turned into smoke daily.

As Darlene Odonogu Samuel, a 46 year old mother of six children in Ikarama pointed out, "Shell agents, Agip agents, NGOs and other people have been coming here and making promises, but so far it has all come to nothing. Still, we have no good roads."

Moreover between 1976 and 2001, the Nigerian government documented 6,817 spills, practically one a day for 25 years. Yet analysts suspect that the amount could even be 10 times higher.

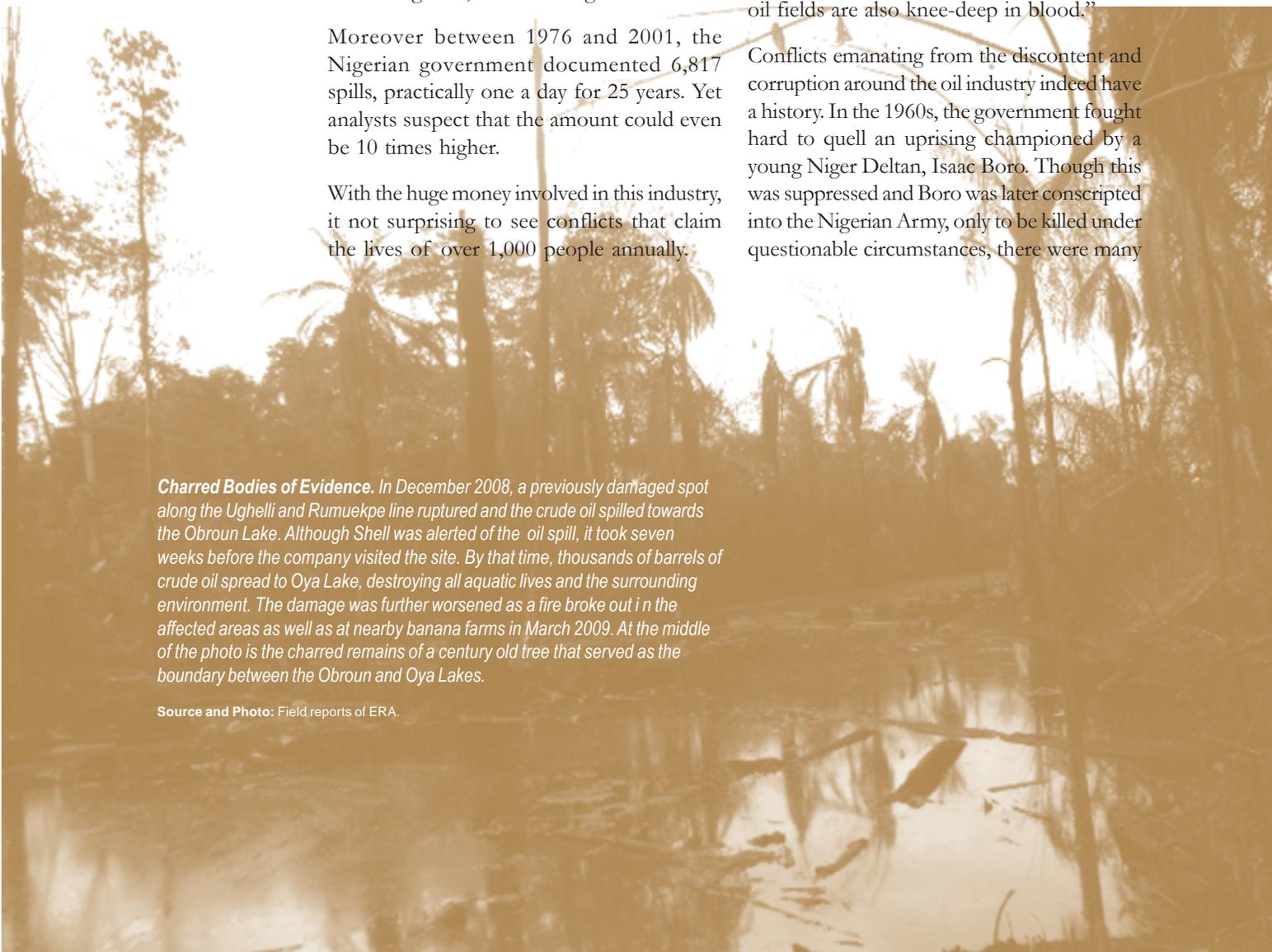
With the huge money involved in this industry, it not surprising to see conflicts that claim the lives of over 1,000 people annually.

Of the oil companies operating at the Niger Delta, Shell has been deemed as the most notorious as it sanctioned human rights abuses committed by security forces at its employ. Shell arms and pays government security personnel and outfits who are always quick to quell any signs of uprising and carry out wanton human rights abuses.

In all of these, women are the major victims, as widows and mothers. They have been the families' pillars on whose shoulders many of sorrow and deprivation fall.

As Environmental Rights Action (ERAction) stated, "The oil and gas fields have not only witnessed massive crude oil spills and gas flares and explosions. We do know that due to high levels of human rights abuses, the oil fields are also knee-deep in blood."

Conflicts emanating from the discontent and corruption around the oil industry indeed have a history. In the 1960s, the government fought hard to quell an uprising championed by a young Niger Deltan, Isaac Boro. Though this was suppressed and Boro was later conscripted into the Nigerian Army, only to be killed under questionable circumstances, there were many



**Charred Bodies of Evidence.** In December 2008, a previously damaged spot along the Ughelli and Rumuekpe line ruptured and the crude oil spilled towards the Obroun Lake. Although Shell was alerted of the oil spill, it took seven weeks before the company visited the site. By that time, thousands of barrels of crude oil spread to Oya Lake, destroying all aquatic lives and the surrounding environment. The damage was further worsened as a fire broke out in the affected areas as well as at nearby banana farms in March 2009. At the middle of the photo is the charred remains of a century old tree that served as the boundary between the Obroun and Oya Lakes.

Source and Photo: Field reports of ERA.

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In 2008, the Royal Dutch Shell made a US\$15.5 million settlement in a case filed by families whose members were murdered, tortured and harrassed by military forces that were protective of the company's operations.



One of the leading campaigners of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (Mosop), poet and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa group was hanged in 1995, along with eight other people from the Ogoni ethnic group.

The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell is Nigeria's biggest oil operator, covering some 31,000 square kilometers. The company, under the name Shell D'Arcy was granted an exploration license in 1938 throughout Nigeria. After years of drilling, its first successful oil well was discovered in Oloibiri in 1956.

According to Amnesty International's report, "Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta," "Although SPDC operates within a delta system and oil infrastructure is frequently located close to farmland and waterways, few, if any, adequate protective measures have been taken by SPDC – pipelines have not been properly maintained and waste products have been released into the environment without adequate monitoring of the impact on people's lives and livelihoods. Despite legal requirements to clean-up and remediate land and water swiftly and adequately, these actions frequently do not happen."

**Sources:** Amnesty International (2009). "Petroleum, Pollution and Poverty in the Niger Delta." URL: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR44/021/2009/en/3be47dff-af1f-4c8e-b7a6-960d229644f7/afr440212009en.pdf>; British Broadcasting Corporation (9 June 2009). "Shell settles Nigeria deaths case." URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8090493.stm>; Shell Petroleum Development Company website. URL: [http://www.shell.com/home/content/nigeria/about\\_shell/who\\_we\\_are/history/history.html](http://www.shell.com/home/content/nigeria/about_shell/who_we_are/history/history.html)

others who fell victims but whose struggles and fates were not well-documented.

The 1990s was one of the most tumultuous times in the Niger Delta. Writer and environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa roused the consciousness of the nation and the international community over the environmental injustice in Ogoniland. Following the controversial killing of four chiefs who were sympathetic to oil multinationals by irate mob of village youths, Saro-Wiwa was arrested and hanged. Military operatives paid by Shell moved into the communities with armoured tanks, guns and various weapons, shooting and killing hundreds of people including women and children, mowing down entire villages, and maiming thousands.

Today, many women still carry these scars and live in deformed bodies. One of the survivors is Promise Yibari Maapie, who had her left arm permanently withered as a result of a gun shot. Her daughter Joy also sustained damaging gun shots on her legs. "The soldiers brought pain, sorrow and hunger into my life," she told a reporter.

After the infamous Ogoni genocide, there have been several cases, including that of the Odi Massacre in 1999, where entire towns were razed down. It was a retaliatory move by the the government's troops, arising from the killing of some military men by militants.

In mid 2009, massacres and bombings happened in several villages in the Gbaramatu Kingdom in the Niger Delta. In the process, many women were killed, wounded or displaced. There were reported cases of those who gave birth in the forests and creeks while running away from the military attack. As usual, there were reports of rape by the soldiers.

Women are the foremost victims in the Niger Delta tragedy. Apart from contending with gas flares and oil spills, they also live at the



**Gathering Force.**  
*Women who are situated at the Niger are becoming increasingly visible as popular and legal actions against oil companies mount.*

Photo from ERA.

very edge of their lives. When rusty pipelines conveying crude oil burst, farmlands, forests, streams and rivers are damaged. Scores are also killed as in October 1998 when an oil pipeline explosion roasted around 2,000 people in Jesse Town in Ethiopia, West Local Government Council of the Delta State. Worse, government interventions are non-existent and when they exist at all, they are either belated or half-baked.

Besides this, constructions of gigantic drilling projects pollute and alter the communities' water ways, depriving residents' access to water. These impacts are felt most by women. Aside from being farmers, they also provide food and water for the family.

As Stella Ogbel, a resident in Imiringi shared, "When we were young, we used to be happy whenever it was raining. Rain water was considered to be clean, fit for drinking. We

don't have that these days. When we collect the rain water from our roofs now, the whole surface would be covered with soot occasioned by the gas flare in our community."

Despite the tragedy that their bodies bear, women have been rendered voiceless in many communities. In most communities, it takes the special intervention of civil society organisations (CSOs) for women to be allowed into the town hall consultative fora where issues affecting the communities are discussed. Men would always insist that the matters to be discussed are too serious for women.

In many cases, women cannot claim land ownership. Farmlands usually belong to husbands and fathers. The deaths of their husbands or divorce could spell the end of their stay in those lands. Thus, environmental disasters constitute a double tragedy for women.

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Nonetheless, in some communities, women are organising themselves, attempting to take up their destinities into their own hands and undoing the malevolent strings of the retrogressive customs in some communities. Such bold attempts can be attributed to the intervention of CSOs and to a large extent, changing times.

For 16 years, the Environmental Rights Action (ERA)/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, the country's foremost environmental justice civil society group, has engaged oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta region. It has held awareness-creating and advocacy skill-building workshops via town hall meetings and other fora. ERA has also monitored oil spills and other environmental disasters.

ERA also produces publications, newsletters, journals, books and other publications documenting instances of environmental degradation. On certain instances, these have drawn positive responses.

In collaboration with affected communities, ERA has lodged legal actions against Shell and other multinationals for many cases of environmental injustices. ERA has also taken up the cases of affected communities to the court of international public opinion. It held a picket outside Shell's headquarters in the Netherlands and presented cases against Chevron to the US Congress.

Aside from its engagement with women in Ikarama, Imiringi and Akaraolu, ERA is working with women in Iguobazuwa in Edo State whose rich rain forest has been forcibly annexed by the French tire-making multinational, Michelin, without prior consent, thereby destabilising many women farmers in the community. ■

**Betty Abah** is the Gender Focal Person of Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth Nigeria, the country's foremost environmental justice non-government organisation.

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