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Petroleum Pipeline Fire Outbreak in Communities of Delta State, Nigeria, 1997 – 2007

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Abstract:

This study examines Petroleum pipeline fire outbreaks in the Sapele/Warri Axis of Jesse, Egorode, Oviri Court and Adeje of Delta State, which are due to oil activities causing the death of over 3000 lives and destroying communities' source of livelihood such as economic trees, food crops, farmlands, water sources, aquatic lives, among others. It further explores the cause of these fire incidents such as oil spillages in pipeline communities of Okolovu, Okuovu, Okwetolor, Oviri Court, Mereje, Egorode, Adeje, Okwejeba, Okufuoma, Okwabude, Jesse occasioned by vandalism and scooping of petroleum products, in which the latter was blamed on people outside these communities, while the former was demonstrated by members of the communities and environs. The study employs primary and secondary sources of data collection and adopts both qualitative and quantitative methods of historical research in its analysis. The study concludes that the impact of these fire incidents, particularly without adequate knowledge of the actual cause of the fire and figures of the victims remains an indelible mark on the Federal Government irresponsibility on the citizenry. Thus, except the Federal and State Governments take an extra measure particularly investigating these events, the people will continue to be affected by these tragic situations.

Keywords: Petroleum pipelines, oil spillage, vandalism

1. Introduction

Delta State, located in the Western part of the Niger Delta region on the map of Nigeria. The State was created in 1991 out of the defunct Bendel State or the erstwhile Midwestern Region of Nigeria. The State lies roughly between Latitude 5° 00' and 6° 45' East of the Greenwich Meridian¹. About 90% of the landmass of the State, especially around Delta North lies at an elevation of less than 150 metres above mean sea level. The landmass covering Delta South and a large portion of Central districts lie below 15 metres above sea level². Mangrove Swamps forests in the coaster areas merge with fresh water swamps and tropical rainforest in the hinterland. The State is endowed with interconnected rivers and waterways, which empty into the Atlantic Ocean. The major rivers in Delta State are Niger, Escravos, Ase, Forcados, Warri, Ethiope, Jamieson, Benin and Ossiomo³.

The State is of a great strategic economic importance to Nigeria. Although Delta State's population is less than 3% of the national population and its area is only 1.9% of the nation's landmass, it accounts for about 30% of Nigeria's oil production, making it one of the largest oil producing states. Also it is one of the leading producers of oil and gas resources in Nigeria with about one-quarter of the national daily volume of oil from the State. It has some of Nigeria's major oil and gas infrastructures⁵. These include refinery, petrochemical complex, gas plants, steel complex, Gas-To-Liquid (GTL) Processing Facility, field logistics bases, networks of interconnecting oil and gas pipelines, maze of flow stations, an offshore loading platform and two export oil terminals, among others⁶.

However, most of the oil infrastructures (oil wells, flows stations, pipelines, etc) are located closed to people's homes, farms, streams, creeks and other water sources of communities⁷. Nigeria has a pipeline network of over five thousand and one (5001) kilometres. This comprises four thousand three hundred and fifteen (4315) kilometres of multi-product pipelines and six hundred and sixty six (666) kilometres of crude oil pipelines⁸. These pipelines stretch across the country, producing a network that inter-connects the 22 petroleum storage depots, the four refineries; Warri Refinery, Port Harcourt Refinery, Eleme Petrochemical Company, and Kaduna Refinery, covering a total distance of 719 kilometres, while offshore oil terminals, which include Forcados, Escravos and Bonny. Also there are jetties at Alas Cove, Calabar, Okrika and Warri⁹ with stretch of connected pipelines. These pipelines are mainly used to transport petroleum products from the refineries/import receiving jetties to over 22 petroleum storage depots at different parts of the country.

The connection of pipelines vandalisation, oil spillage and fire explosion is one of the major impacts of oil exploration and exploitation on communities playing host to oil facilities, particularly, pipelines crisscrossing people's

homes and farmlands. The incidence of pipelines explosion was a recurring event in Delta communities leading to the death of over 3000 persons¹⁰, particularly in areas like Jesse, Ovir Court, Egborode and Adeje, in which people in the surrounding communities were victims of the infernos¹¹. Even with the horror that these events presented, the people in these communities did not relent in scooping fuel from vandalized or a ruptured pipeline, which focused at this time on premium motor spirit (petrol) or Kerosene. Thus, the Nigerian Government responded by forming the Presidential Special Security Committee on Oil Pipeline Vandalisation with the mandate of reducing or eliminating pipeline vandalism in Nigeria¹². But the committee failed to meet its mandate.

The spate of pipeline vandalism in communities in the Delta area and its attendant effect on the nation's economy and the environment of the oil-bearing communities, the nation's oil industry suffered declined in the production of petroleum products¹³. The inability of Government to respond in appropriate manner generated oil related environmental problems in the region such that identifying the cause and those that were involved in the activities became highly controversial¹⁴ at the least and disturbing at the fore. Oil companies and the Federal Government had often blamed oil spillage on sabotage, particularly accusing local aggrieved armed groups to be mainly responsible for the rate of oil theft and vandalisation of pipelines¹⁵. However, even though some communities claimed ignorance of the activities of this criminality, others have admitted contributing through scooping fuels from vandalized pipelines or collaborating with most vandals that are not from the community for monetary reward gained from syndicates of the crime.

2. Pipeline Legislations in Nigeria

The discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1956 informed the legislation of Oil Pipeline Act of 1956, in *which modus operandi* was the establishment of pipelines leeway crisscrossing various communities in Nigeria. The Act granted companies' oil-pipeline right-of-way for 99 years over the surface of a stretch of land under which pipes conveying crude oil to flow stations, and then the terminals were laid¹⁶. The Act as it implies in developed countries for oil industries prevents oil companies from encroaching on other parcel of land and operate with environmental consciousness. In Nigeria, the state merely continues with the policy after 1960 ostensibly with how much revenue it can generate. Using it partly as a safeguard against environment protection was out of it, which then gave Shell the Leeway to lay its pipelines across pipelines across sacred sites, farmlands and homes of the people who live in the Niger Delta¹⁷.

The Act remained effective after Nigeria gained independence as the Oil Pipeline Act of 1963 and the only change in the Act was the Removal of the Crown Government. The Act also reduced lease period to 60 years and later 20 years, respectively¹⁸. However, the Nigeria government, in 1965 promulgated the Oil-Right-of-Way Act¹⁹. The implication of this Act to oil-bearing communities was that any piece of land that was under the right-of-way would not be compensated; and it did not matter what kind of land. This Act made many farmers or families landless in most of the oil communities, since land was redistributed either on family or communal basis²⁰. In most cases the family, whose land was affected, appealed to the age old tradition of land system to accommodate the affected family. A political economist, Daniel A. Omoweh²¹ emphasized the impact of this Act on land, as follows:

Shell's right-of-way running through villages and sacred bushes in the Niger Delta and the law also empowered Shell among other oil companies, to lay its pipes on, over and under land, and as well exercise control over the surface of the specified land; its pipes pose hazard to the inhabitants of the area as they cross manifold of oil/gas pipelines under high pressure in their daily chores²¹.

The Oil Right-of-Way of 1965 did not grant Shell the right of certificate of occupancy and this means that the land on which it operated still belonged to the state by virtue of the Petroleum Decree of 1969. Under this Decree, the community still had right to land but not the oil produced²². This made oil companies to pay compensation to communities or individuals in the case of oil spillage, since the oil belongs to oil companies and the land, that was affected, belonged to the community. To circumvent the impasses brought by the Decree, the Land Use Decree was enacted in 1978²³. This is not an assumption that the Land Use Decree was enacted purposed to protect the petroleum companies, but to a large extent, it reduced the friction that shell and other oil companies had with communities in the Niger Delta area since the 1950s.

3. State to Northern Nigeria an Overview of Pipelines Network from Communities in Delta

The laying of a network of pipelines in Delta State began in early 1970s with the oil windfall by the administration of Gen. Yakubu Gowon. It resulted in construction of refineries in Warri and Kaduna, and laying of pipelines across the nation, particularly supplying the product to the Northern part of the country in 1974. At this time, the Nigerian government laid two pipelines from the Warri.

Refinery to Kaduna in order to serve it with raw materials needed for the production of petroleum and other petrochemical products²⁴. Also, pipelines carrying petroleum product were also laid during this period, such that the pipelines crisscrossing communities such as Jeddo, which were an access road to pipeline communities, such as Ugbokodo, Ughoton, JakpaMereje, Aghalokpe and Eriama²⁵, located in Okpe Local Government Area of Delta State. In addition, Umiriagwa and Okwuokoko had crude oil lines, while Egbeneku was a dumpsite of SPDC for failed equipment, chemicals and crude oil from spillage sites²⁶. Similarly Okolovu, Okuvu, Okwetolor, Ovir Court, Mereje, Egborode, Adeje, Okwejeba, Okufuoma, Okwabude were communities with a stretch of NNPC fuel line en route to the Northern states²⁷, particularly supplying Kaduna Refinery with crude oil and several petroleum depots with Petroleum and kerosene products.

Another area with a network of pipelines was Idjerhe clan in Ethiope west area of Delta State. It comprised numerous oil producing communities with twenty two oil wells²⁸. Idjerhe Clan has about 32 villages, whose occupation is mostly farming, games hunting, fishing, and rubber tapping. Idjerhe is an oil producing community, with its first successful oil well drilled in 1972 and currently has 22 oil wells²⁹ including: Bokoroku (6), Ogbewwe (12), Okuno (2) and Okingo (4), respectively. These oil wells were under the control of Seplat Petroleum Development Company and the oil wells were

tapped into Oben oil field²⁹. The Nigerian National Petroleum Development Corporation (NNPC) had a fuel pipeline from the Warri Refinery passing through numerous communities in Idjerhe clan and others such as Okpe, Amukpe, Jesse, Mossogar, Ologbo, and through Lokoja to Kaduna³⁰. Jesse, the main town in Idjerhe clan was later engulfed in fire incident³¹.

4. Fire Disaster in Delta Communities 1998-2000

Within the period of this study a number of pipeline fire explosions occurred in areas around Warri/Sapele road, resulting in environmental disaster and loss of lives. The people of the affected communities blamed the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Shell Petroleum Development Company for being responsible for the fire outbreaks³². Peter K. Ekeh³³ noted that the most of the oil pipelines had expired³³. Also there was sophisticated vandalism through the use of rare equipment, which was only available to highly skilled and highly placed men who worked for the oil companies or in the Federal Government of Nigeria³⁴.

But the Federal Government blamed the cause of the fire on vandalism of pipeline by criminal elements in the communities. The Group Managing Director, Gaius Obaseki, noted that '... the spate of attacks on the pipelines heightened the attendant tragic fires and loss revenue to government'³⁵. It must be noted that the course of these fire incidences lie along the Warri-Sapele passage of Western Niger Delta, ³⁶. These incidences consumed thousands of lives and loss of large expanse of lands, waters, wasted and uncompensated properties.

Date of Petroleum Fire	Affected Communities	Local Govt. Area	Casualties
Saturday, October 17, 1998	Jesse Town and Environ (Idjerhe)	Ethiope West	1063 dead; Several hundreds injured; burnt farms, houses, boats, economic trees, among others
July 10, 2000	Egborode	Okpe L.G.A	Over 300 people died; Homes and farms destroyed; Drinking water polluted; fishing industry destroyed.
July 10, 2000	Oviri-Court	Okpe	Over 1000 people dead; Streams, Aquatic lives economic trees, fish ponds, farms, and family shrines
July 13-14, 2000	Adeje	Okpe	Homes and farmlands destroyed, over 300 lives lost

Table 1: Selected Fire Disaster in Delta State between 1998 and 2000

Source: Fieldwork, 2020

The table above reveals selected fire disasters in Delta State and also the losses recorded by the various communities, in which a lot of people that were caught in the inferno died while homes, economic trees, vehicles, crops, streams, rivers and other means of livelihood were destroyed in the fire. As stated earlier, many of the dead could not be accounted for, because they were from neighbouring villages³⁷. To this effect the actual figure of the dead could not be given.

4.1. Idjerhe Fire Disaster

A surviving victim of the Idjerhe fire, Mr. O. Efenaya³⁸, narrated the cause of the fire outbreak that led to the death of over a thousand lives, destruction of properties, pollution of water source, destruction of aquatic lives, farmlands and economic trees. He stated that a farmer returning from the day's work first saw the leak from NNPC's high-pressured pipeline transporting fuel from the Warri Refinery to Kaduna on October 16, 1998. On getting home to Jesse town, the farmer shared his experience with the people, and this news spread across the entire community of Idjerhe clan forcing the people to troop to Atiegwo, a community close to the site of the 16-inch pipeline drooping fuel³⁹. Thus on Saturday, October 17, 1998, at about 1.00pm, a heavy sound was heard as the whole area was covered in flames.

However, late General David Edjor opined that the flame was lit by a staff of SPDC to cover up the cause of the spillage. He claimed, 'the company and the Government ... warned the people in English to disperse or something would happen to them ... The officials followed up the threat by firing nerve gas at the crowd, which made it impossible for them to run ... the place was set on fire in order to killeverybody present and prevent anybody from giving evidence'⁴⁰.

Also, Ifowodo⁴¹ criticizes the government for its recklessness for not carrying out its responsibility⁴². This was blamed on the inability of the government to provide enough fuel to its citizens, which resulted in frequent shortage of petroleum product in the country. In a departure from the above, E.NEnukora confirmed that the fire incident destroyed almost a thousand lives and a large expanse of rich arable lands, ⁴⁴ the source of drinking water (streams), and their economic trees⁴³.

4.2. Egborode Fire Disaster

The Jesse fire was a better enough lesson for people vandalizing and scooping fuel in spilled sites but there was little or no precaution taken to prevent the incidence. The Egborode fire disaster was an example of those people who had the news of the Jesse fire incident but refused to apply requisite caution. Thus, the incident shook the foundation of most of the communities, particularly communities in Egborode axis, along areas surrounding Warri/Sapele Road, and

communities linking River Omugba. The areas affected by this spill stretched more than 30km from Okpe L.G.A to Sapele L.G.A from where the river moved to the sea. The community claimed to have reported the situation to the Local Government Council's Chairman, Fulman Akpere, after which the Council chairman responded immediately by informing the PPMC, the government agency maintaining the pipeline⁴⁵ but nothing much was done to salvage the situation.

The community further claimed that members of PPMC visited the site days after the Local Government reported the spillage and no immediate action was taken until the leaking petroleum products exploded causing a huge fire on 10 of July, 2000⁴⁶. At this time, there were people within Egborode community and other Okpe communities, including those from Sapele, Warri and Ughelli who came to the spilled site to scoop fuel⁴⁷. These activities of fuel scoopers, as claimed by members of the affected community, caused the fire to record more casualties than the 1998 Idjerhe fire outbreak, such that the Environmental Right Actions (ERA) made an estimated 3000 persons burnt to death in the fire⁴⁸. M. Agbroko, the Secretary General of the Egborode community, confirmed that all his staff on duty died in the inferno⁴⁹.

The following among others were the victims of the fire disaster Endurance Uwozo, Endurance Esan & Deboi Esan, Naira Esan, Gloria Ikoha, Joshua Akomi, Lucy Ovwirhue, Madam EyamenokpeOdjokpa, EgboOwan, FinegirlUtieyin, Okiemute Etunime (Source: Fieldwork 2020).

Above is a list of some of the victims provided by their relations in the course of oral interview. The interview gave a clearer picture on the number of deaths caused by the fire outbreak. Although the Environmental Right Action (ERA) estimated about 3000 persons, the interview conducted in Egborode showed that there were two groups of victims: indigenes of Egborode and strangers from neighbouring communities and so while the number of victims among the indigenes could be estimated as given by the example above that of the strangers could not. But the overall estimate was far less than 3000 persons. At best it was about one hundred. Also, no forensic examination or investigation of whatsoever type has been conducted by Delta State or Federal Governments particularly accounting for the actual people that died in the fire. Worse still, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation did not give mass burial to victims of the fire. Hence, the figures given are only speculative.

4.3. Oviri-Court Fire Disaster

In July, 2000, a member of the surveillance team spotted a spilling pipe at Aleloje, a community under Oviri Court, with large farmlands owned by the people of Oviri Court. The man informed security personnel of PPMC that there was a leakage on some of the pipelines⁵⁰. This call was reported about five (5) days before the fire incidents but no response came from PPMC⁵¹. Meanwhile the spilled spot became tourist and commercial site where people from different communities, including Warri and its environs went as on-lookers and to fetch the oil⁵². The community claimed that PPMC's helicopter was seen hovering over a section of the pipeline and soon after there was an explosion, which resulted in, great fire and it consumed several human beings⁵³. The federal Government had claimed that the explosion was caused by vandalism⁵⁴. This assertion was supported by the community, who testified that some people vandalised the pipelines and stole quantities of the product and left pipes spilling fuel which spread to other communities. In effect, people, especially farmers, began scooping the fuel⁵⁵. Suddenly the fuel busted into flames which consumed both indigenes and strangers who came from Sapela, Warri, Ughelli, and other adjoining communities to the site to sell to buses and cars on brisk business. Some of the scoopers made up to 500 naira per day⁵⁶ scoop fuel. The money they made from scooping and selling of fuel, attracted more people, who trooped in their numbers to there.⁵⁷ Some of them went with their children for more brisk business and more money⁵⁸. The greed for money attracted so many people than could be accounted for ⁵⁹.

4.3.1. The Following Are Names of Some of the Victims of the Oviri Court Fire Disaster

Okpigo – Boyitie, Esther Andrew, Anworo Oghene, Captain Aworo Oghene, Mrs. Doris Oveghe, Comfort Aworo Oghene, Godfrey Egbe, Chanty Egbe and so on. The list above highlights the victims narrated by the respondents. The only person from Mereje Village that died in the Oviri-Court Fire disaster was Mrs. Doris Avwunudio, a mother of five children, one of which is Lucky Avwunudio, the Eldest⁶⁰. She died in the spilled site where she went to scoop fuel. The husband was away in Abuja when the incident happened; he became traumatized and died two years later. According to him, 'I was sitting with my friends when the news broke out of my mother's death. When my mother died, I was in Primary School, her death made me drop out of school'⁶¹. The eldest son Lucky is now responsible for the upkeeps of the other children.

4.4. Adeje Fire Incident

There were three-fire incidents in Adeje Community. They occurred around 1996, 2000 and 2015⁶². The first fire incident was from a spilled pipeline caused by equipment failure, particularly from a loss valve, while the second fire incident was from a vandalized pipeline and the last fire incident was caused by the inability of the PPMC to fix the pipeline properly, and it actually happened at the same spot where the last two occurred⁶³. No death was recorded in the fire outbreak of 1996 and 2015, but the area lost soil productivity, economic trees, and other crops.

Adeje petroleum fire disaster broke out on Monday, 12-13 of July 2000, after the pipeline was vandalized on January 11, 2000 and there had been spilled since 11 of January to 14 of February, 2000⁶⁴. The people claimed that they reported the case to the NNPC, but there was little or no response from the PPMC. As the spill continued, while people from the community and neighbouring communities and even people as far as Warri, Effurun, Sapele, among others were coming to scoop⁶⁵. L. Akpojar, the community's Chairman confirmed the incidence. This situation forced the people to engage in scooping with buckets and gallons⁶⁶. This continued for several months without any NNPC's official visiting the site but in the evening tankers drove into the area and several others where the pipeline appeared to have been vandalized to carry fuel away⁶⁷.

4.4.1. Names of Some of the Victims of the Adeje Fire Incidence

Lukylgbirire, AtarheOtikpe, Tuesday Away, Hope Away, Gift Away, Kingsley Away, FineboyIghofune, Doctor Oke, IgboElerebo, Alfred Amomano, Godwin Adegbe, Okefe, Omamuromu, Michael Eru, Margaret Agbashe, Amos Tobore⁶⁸.

5. Conclusion

The spate of pipeline vandalism in the Okpe communities has a historical connection, which is not limited to the rise of criminality resulting from the failure of institution of Government in curbing the activities of these criminal gangs. In another way, one can say it is a situation of those who are supposed to protect its property but shifting responsibilities to a people who has little knowledge of it. Here, the communities, who had witnessed sophisticated vandals, at first confronted them with traditional implements but were unable to do so because of the weaponry of these criminal groups. Secondly, members of the communities went a step further of reporting the activities of the groups to the Okpe Local Government Council, the council, immediately informed the PPMC but in most cases they did not show up. The study established that the delay in action by the PPMC and Federal Government allowed the villagers to be involved in the act of vandalism and scooping of fuel.

The Jesse fire disaster and government's unsympathetic position may be responsible for determining the actual figures of the victims and the cause of the fire. The Federal Government's placing an order for the arrest of victims that survived the fire proved to be a major reason why people, who lost their loved ones, failed to show up. This also went through Adeje, Ovir-Court and Egborode fire incidents, where the Government, prior to the fire outbreaks, criminalized scooping of fuel, although no legislation, the relatives of the victims refused to show up for fear of being arrested. It is established that the government had behaved irresponsible for it not to get the actual figures of the victims because the actual victims of the fire incidents have only been speculative; no true figures are given. Also, there were mass burial of victims of the Jesse fire disaster but for Egborode, Ovir-Court and Adeje fire disaster no mass burial and the victims of these fire incidents were meant to rot away as against the people's cultures and traditions.

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