

Environmental Rights Action/ Friends of the Earth, Nigeria

September 2, 2008

Press Release

Gas Flaring: ERA Flays arrest of activists, Journalists

The Environmental Rights Action/ Friends of the Earth, Nigeria (ERA/FoEN) has condemned Tuesday's arrest and detention of its officers, community elders and some journalists at Iwherekan community, Delta State by soldiers guarding gas flaring sites operated by Shell. The group demands their immediate release and an apology from the military and Shell.

In a statement issued in Benin yesterday, ERA said some of its officers, community elders, women, children and journalists from national newspapers and televisions stations including the Federal Government- owned Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) were arrested during a community interactive forum on the impact of gas flaring .

According to the group, about 25 persons including ERA/FoEN project Officer, Chima Williams, the plaintiff in the suit against gas flaring, Jonah Gbemre and a member of the Host Communities Network (HOCON), Comrade Che Ibegura were arrested and detained by the soldiers while the camera of the NTA crew was seized and confiscated.

"We are shocked that this kind of reckless display of crude force which we thought had died and buried with the military junta of General Sani Abacha has suddenly resurrected under Yar' Adua administration. Why is government colluding with oil companies to shield the world from knowing the impact of gas flaring on the lives of Niger Delta people?", asked Nnimmo Bassey, ERA/FoEN Executive Director.

"This action has shown clearly that this government is not concerned about the impact of gas flaring on the livelihoods and health of Niger Delta people. It is also a clear evidence that what this administration has to offer for the genuine agitation of Niger Delta people for an end to gas flaring is, intimidation , crude force and cover ups. It is so sad that this has happened under a government that has gone to the roof top to profess its belief in the rule of law," Bassey added.

A Federal High court sitting in Benin, Edo State and presided over by Justice V. C Nwokorie, had on November 14th 2005 ordered Shell to stop gas flaring in Iwherekan Community, Delta State by April 2007, saying it violates the fundamental right to life and dignity.

The suit was filed on July 20, 2005 by Mr. Jonah Gbemre on behalf of himself and Iwerekan community against Shell, Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and the Attorney General of the Federation, asking for the stoppage of gas flaring in the community.

Nigeria has been the world's biggest gas flarer, and the practice has contributed more greenhouse gas emissions than all other sources in sub-Saharan Africa combined, according to a World Bank 2002 statement.

Flaring is bad for both the environment and the people in the Niger Delta. It can lead to leukemia or asthma and premature death. It causes acid rain which acidifies lakes and streams and damages vegetation.

Tuesday's arrest apparently was to intimidate the community and prevent environmentalists from their continued campaign for an end to gas flaring.

In his solidarity message the Executive Director, of Social Action, Isaac Osuoka said: "The gathering of civil society groups, community leaders and the media in Iwherekan lay bare the unity of Nigerians that gas flaring should stop now.

Unfortunately the action of the soldiers demonstrates that this government has opted to side with corporate profit at the expense of citizens' well-being and the protection of the environment."

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