

Murder In Nigeria

Ordered by Shell & IMF, Paid for by the U.S. Government

Mitchel Cohen

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In the old days, when the state hung somebody and the braided rope broke or the gallows came crashing to the ground it was taken by God-fearing men as a sign that a mistake had been made and the condemned soul was no longer theirs to take; the prisoner was reprieved.

Today's wisdom, however, will abide no such mythology. Steeped in the profane religion of the New World Order, whose merchants of death trade haughtily in the machinery of holocausts, the only spirits that count are those that, indeed, count. Justice resides in the maintenance of profits, in preventing even for a moment the removal of pump from soil, head from noose.

The poet Diane DiPrima summarized the new religion best. With its icy, winter blade ransacking the globe and, ultimately, finding our throats, international capital—self-righteous in its indignation, in its meticulous counting upon the force of its justice—commands: “Get your cut throat off my knife!”

It took the Shell Oil Company, that holy spirit acting through the guise of General Abacha of Nigeria, five attempts, according to *The New York Times*, to successfully hang playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight of his companions, before the sun was up early one day last November, for not even the gallows mechanism complied willingly with the evil afoot that morning. The old gods must have been angry, indeed! Between the fourth and fifth attempt, the noose around his neck, the *Times* reported that Saro-Wiwa was still able to utter: “The struggle continues.” And from such stuff legends are born.

And when finally Ken Saro-Wiwa, Dr. Barinem Kiobel, Saturday Dobee, Paul Levura, Nordu Eawo, Felix Nuate, Daniel Gbokoo, John Kpuinen, and Varibor Beraand—environmental and indigenous rights activists of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) were successfully lynched despite worldwide protests and the temerity of even the gallows in resisting the execution, the cover-up began.

The men were murderers, we were told. They “stood in the way of progress.” They were “anarchists,” because they had dared to organize the Ogoni people in southern Nigeria against the Royal Dutch Shell Company's (Shell Oil) and Chevron's destruction of their environment, because they dared to remove their throats from the blade, their heads from capital's noose. Eighteen more are facing execution in Nigeria for the crime of standing up to the New World Order and protecting their land.

To save them, the land and the ideas for which Ken Saro-Wiwa and his comrades gave their lives, a grassroots boycott of Shell Oil is gathering steam, calling for a worldwide embargo of Nigerian oil and upon the United States government to freeze Nigeria's assets in U.S. banks. (For more information on the boycott, call Greenpeace, at (202) 462-1177.)

Since 1958, when Shell first struck oil on Ogoni lands in southeastern Nigeria, it has destroyed the land, fish and wildlife resources on which the 500,000 Ogoni people depend for their survival. Hundreds of spills have left the landscape puddled with oil the size of football fields.

In 1990, Ken Saro-Wiwa founded MOSOP to unite the Ogoni in a campaign for basic human rights, political autonomy, economic compensation for damages, a cleanup of the spills, and an end to toxic wastes and the poisoning of the air through decades of gas flaring.

The reaction of the Nigerian military-led dictatorship was deadly. It sent troops into Ogoniland to crush every semblance of opposition to the practices of Shell, Mobil, Chevron, Texaco and other oil companies. After all, 80 percent of Nigeria's annual revenue comes from its sale of oil to the United States. Shell Oil, which alone generates 50 percent of Nigeria's GDP, minced no words in "encouraging" the Nigerian regime to crack down on Saro-Wiwa.

As recorded in an internal Nigerian military memo, Shell was pressuring the government to repress the growing environmental movement: "Shell operations [are] still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence."

The document advised that 400 soldiers should begin "wasting operations," "wasting" Ogoni leaders who are "especially vocal individuals." Twelve days later, Ken Saro-Wiwa was arrested, charges against him fabricated. Two key prosecution witnesses later stated that they were bribed by Shell to give phony evidence against Saro-Wiwa.

Meanwhile, a few days after the executions, Shell announced plans to go ahead with a \$4 billion liquefied natural gas plant and pipeline project in the Niger Delta (through Ogoniland), funded, to start, with a \$180 million grant from the World Bank. The Bank's International Finance Corporation is waffling on whether or not to continue to fund the project.

Brave New World Bank

The relationship of international agencies to the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the overall Nigerian situation is the first of four facets that have been omitted from most accounts of the hangings. Missing has been not simply the role of a particularly evil corporation and a particularly evil government, but discussion of the more general evil—the system of global capitalist domination, spearheaded by the IMF/World Bank/USAID "Structural Adjustment Programs" (SAPs) which set the stage for the current wave of repression, ecocide and murder.

In Nigeria, as in the rest of the world, structural adjustment programs have destroyed the environment, busted unions, privatized resources, immiserated huge numbers of people and systematically denied human rights. And in Nigeria, as everywhere, people have resisted, which has led the state to intensify its repression. Two years ago, a military coup overthrew the democratically elected government, the better to rein in environmental activists and re-establish tight rule over the oil-producing region. Since 1993, 27 Ogoni villages have been completely destroyed, 2,000 Ogoni killed, and 80,000 displaced—the price exacted for resisting structural adjustment and global capital.

The IMF/World Bank/USAID axis adds a new dimension to "old fashioned colonialism" or imperialism; as in the past it strives not only to rip off resources and labor from whole regions of the world, but it now uses its economic muscle to bring about specified political changes as well. How? By attaching political requirements which recipient countries have to meet in order to receive desperately-needed funds.

The "axis" then uses inability to repay the debt as political blackmail, extorting ever-more favorable conditions for the indiscriminate looting of resources and labor. In most countries, the debt escalates dramatically with acceptance of IMF-World Bank economic recovery measures. The Nigerian debt, for example, rose from \$20 to \$30 billion in the 1980s after a Structural Adjustment Program was introduced.

As Hofstra professor Silvia Federici explains, the debt crisis is determined not by the larger or smaller amount of the debt due or paid up, but by the processes activated through it: wage freezes, the collapse of any local industry not connected to foreign capital (which provides the hard currency needed for technology-and capital investment), the banning of unions, the end of free education even at the primary level, the imposition of draconian laws making labor and other social struggles an act of economic sabotage, the banning of militant students' organizations, and especially the privatization of land.

Resistance to structural adjustment among the people of Nigeria has been strong, and met by a violent government crackdown on protesters, which set the stage for repression of the Ogoni people. From the earliest phase of the government's negotiations with the IMF, students, market women and workers have protested the end of free

education, tax-certificate requirements for school children enrolled in primary schools, wage freezes, new levies, and removal of subsidies for domestically sold petroleum.

All over Africa students have been at the forefront of anti-SAP protests. Despite the fact that they are a privileged minority, often being ready after graduation to compromise their political convictions for a government job, students in many African countries are now forced, by the objective conditions of IMF-education planning for Africa, to take a more radical stand. It is not an accident that every step in the escalation of IMF-imposed economic austerity measures has been accompanied by attacks on students.

An example of this occurred on May 26, 1986. In the wake of a peaceful demonstration at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria, and one week prior to the arrival of IMF-World Bank officers in Lagos, who were to check Nigeria's books and economic plans, truckloads of mobile policemen invaded the campus, shooting students and visitors at sight. Machine-gun firing police chased the students into the dorms and the surrounding village where they tried to take refuge. More than 40 students were killed and many more wounded.

The massacre did not stop the protests, however. In the following days, riots exploded all over the country. Students in Lagos, Ibadan and other campuses blocked streets, attacked government buildings and prisons (excarcerating hundreds of prisoners, including some from death row), and vandalized the premises of newspapers which had ignored the protest.

Since then, anti-SAP riots have become endemic in Nigeria, culminating in May and June of 1989 with uprisings in the main southern cities, Lagos, Bendel, Port-Harcourt. (Port Harcourt was at one time a center of the slave trade, and of slave revolts.) Once again, crowds of students, women and the unemployed jointly confronted the police and burned many government buildings to the ground. In Bendel, the prison was ransacked, hundreds of prisoners were set free, and food was confiscated in the prison pantry and later distributed to the hospitals, where patients notoriously starve unless they can provide their own food. More than 400 people reportedly were killed in Nigeria in the days of China's Tiananmen Square uprising, though barely a word about the Nigerian riots and massacres could be found in the U.S. media.

Massive uprisings and insurrections are but one part of the resistance against austerity and SAP plans. A daily warfare is fought at the motor parks against the hike of transport prices, at the "bukas" where people insist on a piece of meat in their soup without having to pay the extra price, and at the markets where people defy government attempts to ban "illegal" (non-taxpaying) vendors. Along with this quasi-legal micro-struggle against IMF policies and their results, armed robbery, smuggling, and land-wars have exploded in response to diminishing access to land due to SAP-inspired enclosures. These struggles have not been in vain. The decision at the Paris summit of the OECD (held during the bicentennial of the storming of the Bastille) to cancel a part of the African debt for those countries that implemented SAPS (up to 50 percent for the "poorest" of them) is a recognition of their power.

When seen through the prism of IMF/ World Bank structural adjustment policies, U.S. "intervention" in Somalia—where opposition to structural adjustment also erupted into strong resistance over the years—takes on new significance as well. The starvation in Somalia, it turns out, was most severe in those regions where the IMF was able to implement its structural adjustment program.

In areas that successfully resisted it, there was little starvation. Much of the country's income came from relatives working the oil fields in Kuwait, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Following the Gulf War, in the name of structural adjustment hundreds of thousands of Palestinian, Arab and Somali oil workers were sent back to their countries of origin and replaced with less organized workers from Southeast Asia, costing Somalia around \$300 million a year, plus the additional burden of re-absorbing thousands of returning and now unemployed workers into the already-strained Somali economy, fueling the famine and adding further leverage to the "structural adjustment" pressures exerted by the IMF. One of the behind-the-scenes reasons for U.S. troops in Somalia was to force country-wide compliance with the IMF's structural adjustment, just as we are seeing in Haiti today. Thanks to the IMF, the United Nations and the United States government, Somalia—which is slightly smaller than Texas in geographic area—now owes \$2 billion to Western banks.

U.S. Government Hypocrisy

The hypocrisy of the U.S. government, which pretended to be “concerned” over the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, is the third point generally neglected by the movement for justice in Nigeria. For years Ken and others had petitioned the U.S. government to rein in Shell and the Nigerian government, and support the right to autonomy of the Ogoni and other indigenous people. For years their pleas went unheeded, even scorned.

The U.S. government is complicit in the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the vast destruction in the Niger Delta of both the environment and the Ogoni people, just as it has supported and financed the Mexican government’s crackdown on indigenous movements in Mexico and resistance to NAFTA, GATT and the structural adjustment programs there. The fight of the Ogoni people is the same as the struggle of the Zapatistas in Mexico—same demands, same struggle for autonomy and self-determination, and the same enemies: Domestic governments financed and backed politically by the U.S., the IMF/World Bank/USAID, the oil companies and the banks.

What you can do:

- 1) Boycott Shell Oil, and demand the U.S. embargo Nigerian oil. Call: (212) 261-5640 or (212) 581-0380. Also. fax: CEO Philip Carroll. Shell Oil Corp.: (713) 241-4044.
- 2) Demand the U.S. government freeze the assets of Nigerian dictator Abacha and the rest of his cabal of murderers and thieves.
- 3) Call the Nigerian Embassy: (212) 850-2200. Demand release of the remaining Ogoni political prisoners facing execution.
- 4) Demand removal of Nigerian troops from the Ogoni region, including the 2,000 additional troops sent in following the executions.

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