

- NPDC security officers bar local people from visiting their farms
- Fear of fire outbreak forces community people to flee to Benin City
- Six days after occurrence, gas leakage continues

Ologbo Town is located in Ikpoba-Okha Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria. The town is made up of four major communities (Oghobaye, Imasabor, Ologbo and Itsekiri Riverside Communities) and marks the border between Edo and Delta States in the South. Different tribes such as the Binis, Ijaws, Itsekiris and Urhobos coexist in the town.

The town also plays host to two indigenous oil and gas companies: Pan Ocean Nigeria Limited and the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC), a subsidiary of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The two companies own about 30 functional oil wells in the area and NPDC is currently drilling some new ones in the area. The crude oil extracted from the area is transported through a network of pipelines to Ovadje Flow-station in Delta State.

Meanwhile, the Edo State House of Assembly has given a 48-hour ultimatum to the management of NPDC and Lone Star Drilling Company to stop the gas leakage from the oil well. The Speaker of the Assembly, Honorable Zakawanu Garuba, who gave this order at a plenary session, held on Friday 20, 2009, warned that the Parliament would not compromise the health, safety and welfare of the people of the state.

On Sunday, 15 February 2009, a devastating gas leakage occurred at a new oil well being constructed by Lone Star Drilling Company on behalf of the Nigerian Petroleum Development Company (NPDC) at Ologbo Town. The gas leakage, which is yet to be stopped as at the time of filing this report (Friday 20 February 2009), has completely disrupted farming activities in the town and forced many residents to flee to Benin City because of fear of possible fire outbreak in the area. Some residents of the town, who have decided to brace the odds by staying back in the town, informed ERA that they have been warned by NPDC security guards not visit their farms in the area, as any form of spark from their working tools (cutlass and hoes) or weed-burning could result in fire outbreak that would consume lives and property.

Attempts by ERA field monitor to visit the site of the gas leakage so as to assess the level of environmental damage done by the incident and to ascertain the effort being made by the companies to curb the leakage were thwarted by NPDC security guards deployed in the area. The security guards, who refused to disclose their names, explained that they have been instructed by their superiors not to allow anybody, including the community people, to visit the

site of the leakage. They argued that any form of spark created near the leakage site would lead to fire outbreak.

However some community members who were determined to expose the environmental damage done by the gas leakage as well as the danger the incident poses to the local people, decided to smuggle ERA field monitor through a bush path to the leakage site, to enable him take photographs of the site and surrounding environment

From a distance of about 700 meters, one could hear the loud sound emanating from the gas leakage, just as tick cloud of gas enveloped the air in the area. The farms and vegetation around the site of the gas leakage have also started withering, due to the intensity of the leakage.

In an interview with ERA field monitor, some community elders barred their mind on the cause of the gas leakage as well as the danger it poses to the people and their environment

Mr. Godwin Izekor (Member, Ologbo Community Representative Committee)

"This incident (gas leakage) started on Sunday (February 15, 2009). The leakage was caused by the activities of Lone State Drilling Company, which was contracted by NPDC to drill some new oil wells for them in this area. Two new oil wells had already been successfully drilled by the company, before they encountered this problem (gas leakage). As they were drilling the third oil well they struck gas and the technical people could not deal with the problem immediately. So the gas has been leaking for the past six days (February 15 - 20, 2009). Since Sunday (February 15, 2009), when this incident occurred, many of our people have fled to Benin, because they are afraid that the gas leakage may eventually lead to fire outbreak.

As I am speaking to you now, NPDC and Lone Star Drilling Company have cordoned off the affected areas and our people have not been able to go to their farms in that area. But these same companies have not deemed it necessary to supply relief materials to those whose livelihoods have been disrupted by this incident

Madam Esther Ojo (Women Leader, Ologbo Community)

I was actually thinking of traveling to Benin City because of the danger that this gas leakage poses to lives and property in this community. But I could not do it because I am the women leader of this community. I have to make sure that our woman and children are educated on the need to avoid that area (gas leakage site) and not to do anything that would lead to fire outbreak in the community. Although the gas leakage has already destroyed some farms in that area and prevented people from going to salvage their crops in the farm, but I think life is more valuable than crops and property.

The major problem we have now is that NPDC and the drilling company are yet to stop the leakage, even though it is almost a week since the incident occurred. However, I want you to let them know that they must pay compensation to the people affected by this incident

Mr. Lois Okahor (Farmer/petty trader at Ologbo)

I think you saw it yourself. Didn't you see how the security guards deployed in that area by NPDC and the drilling company were interrogating people and turning people going to their farms back? That is what they have been doing since on Sunday (February 15, 2009). Their argument is that they don't want anybody to go and ignite the leaking gas with fire, but how do they want people to survive without going to their farms. Why did they not supply the people with relief materials, since they don't want them to go to their farms for now? For me, it appears the drilling company lack the capacity to deal with this leakage problem. They have been assuring us that they would soon fix it, but it is almost a week since the incident occurred and nothing has been done. I think the Edo State Government should be alerted, so that they can wade into this problem.

In view of the seriousness of the current situation in Ologbo Town, ERA demands that

- NPDC and Lone Star Drilling Company should take immediate steps to stop the gas leakage
- NPDC, Lone Star Drilling Company and the Edo State Government should deploy fire service men and equipment to the Ologbo town while efforts are being made to stop the leakage
- Relief materials should be supplied to those who have been prevented from going to their farms because of the fear that they could ignite the leaking gas with fire.
- NPDC and Lone Star Drilling Company should be ready to pay adequate compensation to those whose farms and crops have been destroyed by the gas leakage.