

LOCATION: Opuama, Eniwari, Aguobiri and other Communities along the Silver River in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Large scale pollution of the environment of several communities.
- Failed pipeline had ruptured at same spot earlier.

Opuama, Eniwari and Aguobiri are communities lined up along the banks of the Silver river in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area in Bayelsa.

Aguobiri community plays host to a Shell facility, fed by several pipelines among which is the Oporoma-Aguobiri pipeline. The inhabitants are predominantly fishermen and subsistence farmers.

In September 2007, the Bayelsa State owned radio, Glory F.M. 97.1 announced an oil spill from Shell Petroleum Development Company's facility around the Silver River Communities, attributing the spillage to sabotage.

In a chance meeting with some indigenes from the area affected recently, ERA monitors were duly informed that, apart from the one earlier announced in September, 2007 another spill has occurred again which has devastated the environment.

Being assured that the crude was still floating on the creeks, rivulets and Silver River, apart from being everywhere in the bush; ERA's field monitor decided to find out. And so, the trip which started around 10.am on Monday, 26th November, 2007, took the field monitor to Opuama, Eniwari and Aguobiri, passing through other communities along the Silver River. He came back to Yenagoa at about 5pm on the same speedboat that took him to the communities, with a report as you can see below.

Although initially the field monitor felt disappointed as the speedboat raced on without any signs

of oil spill on the river or its banks. But just about 2 miles to Opuama Community, the tell tale signs began to appear. The crude oil was observed on the vegetation on the river banks and on the water hyacinth floating on the Silver river. The volume increased as we made our way to Aguobiri, the main source of the spill.

At Opuama:

Although there have been several cases of oil spill (in recent times) in this area, this present one is the heaviest in terms of the volume of crude oil we have seen on our river. It started flowing in September 2007 (on the Silver River) from the Oporoma/Aguobiri pipeline, owned by Shell. Since it occurred during the flood, it affected all our ponds and farms in the bush and the whole river is polluted as you can see. The river has been our only source of drinking, bathing and washing water. We couldn't use it again for the above purposes as a result of the crude oil. Besides our fishing activity has also slowed down due to the effect of the spill on the fishes and our fishing gears. It is by the grace of God that we manage to survive with the rain water. Health wise too, our people have been experiencing cough, itching and high fever - Alaini D.M. Ede Alakere, CDC Chairman, Opuama.

On whether the spill was caused by Sabotage

Although the earlier spills (around March, 2007) were attributed to sabotage, this one of September, 2007 is not sabotage as the Community Development Committee (CDC) Chairman of Aguobiri told other Community members in a meeting at Oporoma (at the instance of UNICEF), where all CDC Chairmen from the area gathered on the 12th of November, 2007. Also, when the Silver River Communities met (At Eniwari) on Sunday, 18th November, 2007 we expressed our displeasure aggressively to the CDC Chairman of Aguobiri, insisting that if the spill was as a result of sabotage by members of his community, the Aguobiri people should know that other communities suffering the effect cannot take it anymore. Then again, the CDC Chairman of Aguobiri restated that the spill was not caused by sabotage but corrosion of pipes and equipment failure. Despite what we have suffered all this while, neither the government nor Shell have visited us to sympathies with us. Compensation or relief materials seem a far cry. You people should, please help us and draw the attention of the authorities to our plight. Our chairman, Opuama.

Royal Highness, King N.A. Oumatebe, OPU V1 Amananaowei of Opuama Kingdom.

At Eniwari:

As you can see, we are at the receiving end of the oil spillage. Yes, what you heard that has brought you to our town, is very true. But up till now, if not for ERA's visit, neither the government nor Shell has visited us to talk of clean up and other remediation measures or compensation. My people have suffered various ailments due to these ceaseless spills we suffer from. Apart from this particular one flowing on our river, which is coming from the burst pipe at Aguobiri, if you go into our forest right now, you will weep for us and can't write as you write now. There are several leaking spots from Shell's pipeline inside our bush which have destroyed our land, farms and ponds. Just see how the fishes die in our ponds. Some of the spots have been clamped by Shell (Along the Diebu Pipeline) but claimed that they were caused by sabotage. Chief Abel Nathaniel Vincent, Deputy Paramount Ruler of Eniwari.

As a result of the spill in our bush, all the fishes in our rivulets, creeks and ponds have perished. As a fishing folks, you can imagine what is our lot now. It is a very sad tale for us -Chief Isaac Stephen, a compound Chief at Eniwari.

At Aguobiri, Source of spill:

These oil spills always occurred here and Shell has repeatedly claimed such spillages to Sabotage. Although they do cleanup, but for this particular one nothing has been done. The spill site is just across our community, over the river. To the best of my knowledge, while Shell claim that the one that occurred earlier in the year was sabotage, that of September, 2007 was as a result of equipment failure. Yes, Shell came and did Clamping around July, 2007 or so. But unfortunately, this current spill you see on our creeks and river, burst out from the same clamped spot in September, 2007. It seem the clamping was not properly done. And since then (September, 2007) we have suffered this spill -Abraham Family, Vice Chairman, CDC, Aguobiri town.

Confirming what his vice said (above), the CDC Chairman of Aguobiri Town, David Jimmy Ayoko, said The flood took the crude oil into our bush and it has destroyed our farms, ponds, fishing nets and the general ecosystem. Even those who go in with their canoes come out soiled all over with crude oil. We watch helplessly as fishes in the throes of death struggle with death in our ponds. Some dead ones were picked by our people. So, to say the least, the effect of this spill is telling greatly on us; it has affected our means of livelihood. This spill was not cause by sabotage at all . .

Conclusion: With what was heard and seen during the field trip, it is a real case of continuous spill and pollution of the environment. Though some fisher folks were observed going about their business on the Silver River, there is no way they can get normal catch with the presence of such heavy crude floating on the river. The situation calls for action in support of the people and their environment

Recommendation:

In view of the observations above, it is hereby recommended that

- (1) The government (Federal, state and Local) should prevail on Shell to take immediate steps to halt the flow of the crude oil into the environment
- (2) In accordance with the industry regulations, Joint Investigation Team should be sent to ascertain the level of spill and damage done to the environment, including the cause of spill with a view to clean up, remediation, and compensation.
- (3) Shell, as was recently done in Ikarama (In Yenagoa Local Government Area), should employ the services of youths from such high spill prone areas to serve as surveillance on their pipelines.
- (4) Clamping should be properly done by contractors to avoid situations whereby spills resulting from equipment failure are attributed to sabotage, just to avoid paying compensation to victims.
- (5) The Bayelsa State Ministry of Environment should take steps to visit victims of oil spills and make recommendations on behalf of such communities to avoid the present feeling of alienation suffered by the people.