

In a watershed event which, signposts a new dawn in the annals of Nigeria's environmental evolution and the benefits of effective partnerships between civil society and the government, over 200 participants representing the academia, civil society groups, local communities, women groups, the media, government ministries and agencies, members of the national assembly, and friends from Norway and USA converged on Abuja for a two-day national consultation on the environment. The meeting was hosted by ERA in conjunction with the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Environment.

The theme of the consultative meeting was: The Nigerian Environment and the Rule of Law.

In his opening remarks, Chair of Friends of the Earth International, Rev Nnimmo Bassey said the theme of the consultation was carefully chosen to push the issue of environmental rights and sustainability through the government's avowed rule of law template.

The Minister of Environment, in his speech stated that if we must be taken seriously in our strives for an environmentally sustainable society we must have a comprehensive body of laws regulating the environmental sector.

The Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in his remark stated for this government, we believe that protecting the environment ultimately translates into good governance, therefore now is the time for us all to join hands in this most important assignment of our generation for the protection of our environment.

The keynote address was delivered by Hon Uche Onyeagocha, a former member of the House of Representatives. Hon Onyeagocha emphasized the relationship between good environmental governance and credible elections because credible elections produce credible representatives of the people. He stated that such representatives are better motivated to protect the people and their environment because they can also be held accountable. He also emphasised the point that environmental governance is determined by the existence of laws directing citizen's activities as they relate to the environment. He observed that there is no law in Nigeria that gives any corporation the power to destroy the environment and that gas flaring is a flagrant violation of the rule of the law.

The consultation was divided into four plenary sessions and two working group sessions where

participants critically examined the status of extant environmental laws in Nigeria, the need for fundamental reforms and the challenges that would have to be overcome in the process. Specifically, issues such as land rights, ecological justice, labour, gender and the environment, the vexed question of the Niger Delta environment, violence and the impact of oil on local livelihoods were discussed among others. In the process, 14 well researched papers were presented by carefully selected resource persons and exhaustively debated by participants

In the course of the exhaustive discussions and debates, it was observed that

- The environment is in danger and requires urgent action to rescue it from the path of grave degradation

- The partnership between government and civil society is essential to drive the process of rescuing the environment and making it sustainable

- Good governance and a political system that produces and guarantees credible elections

Nigerian state of dissenting voices in resource rich communities. This repression uses the full coercive powers of the state (military and paramilitary forces) to crush voices of protest at the instance of multinational oil companies like Shell. It also uses the militarization of oil rich communities to ensure uninterrupted access to energy security for an inflexible economic and social system built on fossil fuels.

Participants observed, in particular, that the landing of American troops in the Gulf of Guinea through the instrumentality of AFRICOM would further militarize our communities, besides undermining the sovereignty of Nigeria as an independent nation state. Participants also drew attention to the new forms of foreign American military presence in Nigeria which would involve American soldiers in full civilian roles such as bridge, schools and hospital builders in the nooks and crannies of the Niger Delta.

In spite of agitations by several mass movements, community groups and civil society groups in the Niger Delta to resist oil multinationals and the local ruling elite from the continuing plunder of their lands, resources and livelihoods, the government and oil multinationals have continued to pay deaf ears to the agitations. Rather government is dishing out palliative measures, while at the same time conniving with the western world to further militarise the region through the AFRICOM arrangement

It was also stressed that environmental problems are not only interrelated but are also a result of international oil diplomacy. While gas flares in the Niger Delta, contribute to desertification in Nigeria and global warming, the entire framework for regulating and acting on oil problems in Nigeria is related to and derives from international interests in Nigeria's oil.

From the foregoing, and recognising that protection of the environment is a duty we all owe the earth and humanity, the forum resolved as follows:

That the government should stop further operations aimed at discovering and exploiting new oil and gas fields. The oil should be left under the ground as oil operations are harmful and constitute a threat to the environment and continued human existence.

That there should be no further extension of the deadline on gas flaring beyond 31st December 2008 and where flares are not stopped oil production should be halted at such points. Nigerians should also embark on mass actions to ensure that flaring stops.

Land Use Act and other anti-people laws should be repealed and land returned to the people as of right. Nigerians should embark on sustained peaceful agitations until these obnoxious laws are repealed

Women, as key players in agriculture at both rural and urban areas, must be involved and play active roles in the Federal Government's land reform agenda.

Communities should be actively involved in any process that will produce legislations that affect their land, environment and future.

AFRICOM should not be allowed into the Gulf of Guinea and must NEVER be allowed into Nigeria. AFRICOM will, if allowed into Nigeria, invade the Niger Delta and other parts of the country that have resources that are needed by western consumers.

Reparations should be paid to oil-bearing communities by the government and the oil multinationals for extractive activities that have violated communities, groups and individuals in such areas.

Government should take immediate steps to detoxify or clean up the Niger Delta and other

environments such as Jos, Plateau State tin mine areas degraded by mining and industrial activities.

ERA and other NGOs and civil society should embark on aggressive campaigns on environmental justice issues.

There should be a collaboration between ERA and the Nigerian Labour Congress, other labour unions and all progressive and patriotic organisations in Nigeria to push through the resolutions of the Consultation

Any law that tends or professes to protect the environment and people's rights to a peaceful and clean environment and land ownership should truly achieve the proposed aims. They must also be justiciable and local peoples and communities should be empowered by law to enforce these laws by seeking redress in law court

Special environmental courts should be set up and judges that are knowledgeable about environmental matters should be appointed to serve in such courts

Oil companies must pay ecological debts which will be the cost of restoring the environment and human systems in the Niger Delta that have been left unaccounted for in the cost of their doing business, at huge profits in the Niger Delta. Communities must be mobilised to insist on payment of these ecological debts being owed them by oil companies from developed countries as a result of oil activities that have caused great ecological damage.

Need for harmonization of ERA Bill and that of the Ministry of Environment to reflect emerging issues and avoid constitutional pit-falls

Need for domestication of international conventions, treaties, protocols and standards on the environment