



**Friends Of
the Earth,
Nigeria**

ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTION / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH, NIGERIA

214, Uselu Lagos Road, P.O.Box 10577 Ugbowo, Benin City, Edo State. Nigeria
Tel: 052-880619, email:eraction@eraction.org. Website: www.eraction.org

ENVIRONMENTAL FIELD REPORT 207

Title: ERA/FoEN's Visit to Gbaramatu Displaced Persons.
Location: Ogbe Ijaw, Delta State.
Date of visit: June 12, 2009
From: Denike Onasoga-Molake

Introduction

A five-member team led by Mr. Nnimmo Bassey, Executive Director, Environmental Rights Action (ERA) visited the displaced people of Gbaramatu Kingdom, who are currently camped in a hospital complex in Ogbe Ijaw, a community close to Aladja town in Delta State. The team arrived Ogbe Ijaw on June 12, 2009 at about 1.32pm. The visit was undertaken to see the situation of the displaced people as well as provide basic relief items to augment their needs. Most importantly, the visit served as a symbolic gesture to show that the Gbaramatu people are not alone in their ordeal. The people of Gbaramatu kingdom had fled their homes in the wake of the May 2009 bombardment of their communities by the Nigerian Federal Government troops. The military bombardment comprising aerial and sea raids was undertaken according to the Nigerian government for the purpose of dislodging and containing militants' activities at Camp 5, situated close to Gbaramatu kingdom.

In the early days of the bombardment and displacement, ERA had sent one of its staff to the camp to ascertain the situation of things.

Purpose of Visit



On arrival, the team was met by members of the Delta State Rehabilitation Committee (DSRC), and was conducted round the hospital turned refugee camp. Mr. Nnimmo Bassey saluted the people on behalf of Environmental Rights Action (ERA) and Host Community Network of Nigeria (HoCoN).

He stated that the visiting team is not governmental, but groups on the side of the people. Noting that the event leading to the people's displacement were read in newspapers and shown on television, he said the visit was undertaken to show concern for the plight of the people who have become innocent victim of the oil politics playing out in the Niger Delta. He noted that the current problem is as a result of oil in their communities, which

ordinarily is not a bad thing.

Stating that the living condition of the people is pathetic, he said that their well being has been by God's grace, and implored them to keep up their hope and voice, inspire their children, some of whom were born in the bush during the ordeal, to ensure a better future for them.

Mr. Bassey advised them to upon returning to their communities take active charge in deciding way forward, and averting recurrence of the present situation. He pledged ERA and HoCoN's readiness to stand with the people if called upon to make a better future possible.

Situation at the Camp

The visiting time coincided with meal time at the camp, as people jostled to get a piece of the basic Garri(Eba) and Egusi meal, prepared and distributed in a make shift zinc shed. The team was conducted around the camp on behalf of the DSRC by Ms Fanty Wariyai and other committee members.

The hospital turned camp has about 3000 women and children who congregate mostly on the floor of the hospital building. The camp space is crowded, with few hospital beds serving also as seats for about 7 women at a time, while others sit on the floor with their children thus prompting questions on how the people sleep (the team did not see any mat rolled away). There were no traces of facilities for hygienic living, while the hospital rooms were bare of people's belonging, obviously due to emergency escape of people from their homes.



The situation of the camp presents various problems ranging from health arising from over crowded living. Also, children have been unable to go to school due to the disruption of normal life, while there is the greater issue of vulnerability of young ones, especially young girls who could be taken advantage of for promises of meager benefits. A total of 24 babies have been delivered under the sparse condition of the camp, including one delivered a day prior to the visit. The hospital which though had been completed but not commissioned or commenced operation has few personnel who are overwhelmed by the medical needs of the people.



Nnimmo holding one of the babies delivered in a canoe.

The camp was filled with women, children, young boys, and devoid of men, excepting about 4 members of the DSRC present during the visit. The team was told that the few men amongst those that arrived the camp earlier were arrested as suspected militants, and as such most of

the men and elderly are in still in the bush.

Ms. Wariyai also explained that the people were moved from the primary school in Ogbe Ijaw which first served as a camp to the present hospital complex. With the movement however, the people are affected by the psychology of living in hospitals, and as such have taken to seeking refuge at night in other places, and returning to the camp in the mornings.

Testimonies



Giving a passionate account of life in the camp, Mrs Akpoaboere Helpme of Okorekoko kingdom relieved her experience during the attack. She noted that the thundering sounds of gunshots came unexpectedly, with people scampering helter-skelter with little or no thoughts and time to rescue their children and the elderly. In her own bid to save her mother and baby, her six weeks old daughter fell in the river and in her panic state of mind she did not realize this for a while until she saw the baby floating miraculously on the water.

Mrs. Helpme also explained that life for people in the camp has been hard, while there are several people scattered, missing, and in the bush. She particularly highlighted the needs of the elderly who are frail and helpless and are still in the bush.

Noting the efforts of various agencies and people in providing food and relief materials, she nonetheless stressed that the people want to go back to their homes and pick up the pieces of their lives. The disruption to family life was exemplified by the fact that her now 6 weeks old baby is yet to be named. She said that the troops are still laying siege to their communities and shooting into the bush. She thereby urged that the Nigerian government should restrain the army and let them have access to their homes.

Presentation of Relief Items



Items comprising bags of garri and rice, kegs of palmoil, toiletries, tubers of yam were presented to the people. Recognizing the special needs of children who have been out of school due to the disruption of communal life, children books and writing materials were also included in the items presented. Making the presentation on behalf of ERA and HoCoN, Mr. Nnimmo Bassey said the items were given as a token to show that their plight is shared by many others outside of the camp. He reiterated the need to ensure that there is justice in the communities, and people are able to live healthy lives devoid of pollution and deprivation.

In her response, Ms Wariyai thanked the team for the visit and presentation on behalf of the DSRC Chair who was not around during the time of the visit. She also used the opportunity to thank other Nigerians and UNICEF who (donated drugs) for their help, while soliciting for more help. She implored the visiting team to join its voice to others, using the media to appeal to the military to withdraw its troops from their communities, so people can return home. She pleaded that the people do not want to continue to live as refugees at the mercy of the kind gestures of others.



Ms Wariyai saying thanks to Nnimmo and the group for their kind gesture.

Conclusion

The team saw first hand the situation of the displaced people of Gbaramatu kingdom. From observation and interaction with the people, it was obvious that the people were living in dire conditions, with little food, abysmally poor living condition, and disruption to family life, as well as loss of loved ones. The people though eager to return home, however are convinced that their communities are still under siege and the lives of their people, especially the men and elderly taking refuge in the bush are still in danger. They particularly found it disheartening that they have become refugees in their own country out of no fault of theirs, and living off the kind will of others. To all intent, it has become clear that the people's main preoccupation now borders on returning home, for in the words of Ms Fanty Wariyai 'There is no place like home'.

ERA Demands



some of the displaced people at the camp.

1. Immediate stoppage of attacks on Gbaramatu communities by Government troops.
2. Government assistance in rebuilding the communities and returning the refugees to their homes and livelihoods
3. Better health care and provision of others amenities for the refugees at Ogbe Ijaw camp.