



ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS ACTION / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH, NIGERIA

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## ENVIRONMENTAL TESTIMONIES 2009/04

Title: Okpoama Oil Spill; fishing camps devastated by the impact

Location: Okpoama Kingdom, in Brass LGA of Bayelsa State.

Date of Visit: 28<sup>th</sup> May, 2009

From: Alagoa Morris and Akpotu Ziworitin

### Introduction

Okpoama is a Host community to several Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) oil facilities. It is located in Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

It is an Ijaw community with several satellite settlements and fish camps around the fringes of the Atlantic Ocean. It takes about one hour by speedboat from Ogbia town to Okpoama .

Following the report of a recent oil spill that impacted on the community and its fishing camps, ERA's field monitors visited the community on May 28, 2009.

Below are testimonies from the community:

**Chief Paul Briggs Omubo – Suobagha** Chairman of the Okpoama Council of Chiefs



*"We have just experienced a major oil spillage in Okpoama Kingdom. Our people noticed the oil spill on May 12 or 13, 2009. The volume of crude oil on the surface of the water in the creeks and river was so thick that it was difficult to separate the crude from the water. My people at the fishing camps were so negatively impacted that they could no longer go out to fish.*

*Apart from the fact that there were no more fish to catch, the fishing nets, hooks and traps were damaged by the spill. The spill resulted in the death of aquatic lives and many were seen dead and floating on*

**Pic. 2: Damaged fishing net.**

*the surface of the water. Just this morning, I received information from some of the fishing camps at the fringes of the Atlantic Ocean that the oil slick has spread to their environment, impacting negatively on their fishing activities.*

*This kingdom has suffered from other oil spills in the past. There have been situations where the oil slick spread from other places to affect us here. Our fishing settlements/ camps have always been worse hit in such circumstances; without any compensation or apology from either the oil companies or the authorities.*

*Our reputation as disciplined folks is very important to us. It is on record that ever since Agip laid its pipes in our environment there has never been a time when it was reported that persons from this community or the entire Okpoama kingdom tampered with the pipelines. We have neither contemplated nor been involved in sabotage. It is therefore really disturbing that Agip attributed this current oil spill to sabotage. I think these oil companies attribute almost all the oil spills to sabotage with a view to dodging responsibility.*

*I had met with some Agip staff, including the Swamp Manager, here in the community. They briefed me on the matter and left. What I heard later about Agip attributing the oil spill to sabotage makes me very uncomfortable. This is a very serious matter and I don't think it is proper to play politics with it. We are talking about our environment and livelihood. We depend on the environment.*

*I was personally informed by members of the Youth Executive that I sent to the spill site that even the booms used to contain the spewed crude oil could not effectively stop the crude oil from flowing into the nearby Eku-eku Creek. The ruptured spot on the pipeline has been clamped. Recovery or scooping was also set in motion by Agip while the clamping was ongoing.*

*We have sent our experience and protest in writing to the State Ministry of Environment, our representatives at the State and National Assemblies, and to Agip. We implore ERA to also tell the authorities of our plight. We are not only expecting relief materials from Agip, we expect the company to carry out proper clean up of the impacted environment and also pay us adequate compensation for damages to our environment and source of livelihood. If you go to the water front you will notice the*

*crude oil slick. That will give you an idea of how far the slick has spread."*



**James O.Owolo**, an Executive member of the Okpoama Youth Movement

*"Agip was already working at the spill site before the community was informed. We met them trying to contain the spread of the crude oil with booms. There were also some military personnel with them, members of the Joint Task Force [JTF] patrolling the area. When we enquired to know why they were on site without*

*informing the host community, they told us that they were only trying to contain the spread of the spill first. As a result of our insistence that they go and formally inform our Chiefs, some Agip staff went to Okpoama with us that day. After the meeting with the community leaders, some of us also went with them to their office at Brass Terminal. They told us that when it was time for Joint Investigation Visit [JIV] our community would be contacted. It is sad to note that up till now Agip has not come to us for the JIV. This is so even though they have clamped the ruptured spot on the Brass/ Oгода pipeline.”*

**Mr. Ngozi Nickson Kulo**, the Youth President of the Okpoama Youth Movement

*“Agip took undue advantage of our peaceful disposition to do what they did. One of the main reasons we allowed them to carry out clamping of the pipeline was our concern for the environment. We saw the heavy volume of crude gushing and considered what had already gone into the Eku-eku creek and adjoining rivers. We were really worried about the safety of the environment and our livelihood. We were overwhelmed and that was the only reason we supported the clamping before talks of JIV. Agip seems to have exploited that to their advantage.*

*However, because of the immediate danger posed by the spread of the slick, a recovery contractor hired seven youths each from Twon-Brass and Okpoama. Seven others were picked from some neighboring communities too like Fantuo and Iwoama to assist in recovering some of the spilled crude.”*

### **Testimonies from Some of the Folks at the Fishing Camps**

**Mr. Okon Monday**, the caretaker of Bendick Kiri fishing camp.

*“This fishing camp is named after the founder of the settlement. He is an Okpoama indigene and his wife is here with us. The name of the founder is Golden Bendick.*

*I have spent several years here in Okpoama kingdom, especially at this fishing camp. Due to the effect of the oil spill on our fishing activities, we could no longer engage in fishing. I left for Okpoama [the main town] some days ago and have just returned this morning. This oil spill occurred either on the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of this month of May, 2009. Since I came to this fishing camp many years back I have not seen this type of oil spill. Though we have been experiencing the spread of oil slick from time to time, coming from other areas, the volume of this very one is unprecedented. Even for us here to take our bath at the waterside was a big problem; as the whole surface of the river was covered with crude oil slick. We have lost some of our fishing nets, hooks and traps to this oil spill. You know we have different types of fishing nets; those for crayfish are not the same with the ones for catching fish. What do we do even though some of these fishing gears have been damaged? We are ordinary people and apart from reporting our plight to our leaders at Okpoama, we don’t know what else to do in situations like this. If you had been here about a week or so earlier, you would have noticed what I mean. Even now, as you go round the camp, you will see some of the nets and traps lying idle or damaged by the oil spill.”*

**Mrs. Timipre Golden, a fisherwoman**



*"I am just returning from fishing. Whatever the case, it is our occupation and we have to go out daily and try. Owing to the recent oil spill that spread over the river, we can no longer catch fish as we used to. You can see that the fishes that returned with us are not up to ten. This cannot be equated with the efforts put into the venture. Yet, no matter how discouraged some of us feel we are used to going out every day. It is still better to go out and try the river than to sit down at home.*

**Pic.1:A day's fish catch by Mrs. Golden & Elder Edgar**

*I am the wife to the founder of this fishing camp. We expect that when things like this happen, the government and Agip should come to assist us to ameliorate the situation. We have been badly affected by this oil spill. Our proceeds from fishing help us to meet our other needs. Our hooks, nets and traps are damaged. The crabs we use as bait for our hooks are also destroyed. The spill has made things really tough for us. We want ERA to assist us in passing this message to government and the oil company, Agip. We should not be left like this; it won't be fair to leave us like this. The government should protect us from these oil companies."*

**Mrs. Timipre Slink**

*"Even though you have come now when the crude oil slick seems to have become less in the environment, I believe you saw some of the slick on the river and creeks as you approached this environment. There are several signs and evidences of it everywhere around us. Go round this camp and you will see the nets and other fishing gears spoiled by the oil spill. We spend so much to buy detergent with which we wash some of these fishing gears before we use them again. During the first week after the spill, we could not even take our bath properly at the waterside. You know we love having our bath in the river. The oil slick was so thick that it was like a fight to separate the water from the oil while attempting to go into the water. Then another thing we experienced was that after bathing our whole body would be covered with crude oil, giving it a shining appearance. It was not a good experience."*

**Mrs. Inabirigha Elkenah Orutugu**

*"We have really suffered a lot from this current oil spill. I would like your organization, ERA, to tell Agip to come and give us some relief materials and compensate us for loses we have incurred. For instance, we need clean drinking water, drugs and other necessities. I mention drugs because even though we are not sick now, who knows what may affect us later as a direct consequence of contact with this oil spill. We need assistance in order to replace our damaged fishing gears. For the fact that the incidence*

*of the spill has killed or driven away some of the aquatic lives we depended on here, reducing our daily catch in the process, Agip should come and compensate us.*

*We can no longer move about with naked fire as a result of the oil slick on the river. We used to go to inspect our traps and nets in the night with some improvised lamps. For fear of the consequences, we have stopped going out for fishing at night with these naked lamps.”*

### **Observations**

Other impacted fishing camps include power Kiri, Victor Kiri, Lenard Kiri, Ezuian Kiri, Tein Kiri, Kanus Kiri, and Mmbainbe Kiri. All these fishing camps are situated in Okpoama environment.

Even though the oil spill had occurred about two weeks before ERA’s visit, the oil slick was still observed floating and it could also be noticed on some of the vegetation around the shorelines. ERA



also saw a good number of fish traps and nets damaged by the oil slick at the fishing camp. Some of the crabs normally used as bait were also seen preserved in containers at a camp. One other thing observed is the quietness of the creeks and rivers; very few people were seen going about the means of livelihood, fishing. The sad situation was also noticed on the faces of the people as they responded to ERA’s questions. As ERA was returning to Ogbia town, a dead cat fish was noticed floating on the river.

**Pic.3: Dead cat fish floating on the river**

### **Conclusion / Recommendations**

Though it was encouraging to hear that Agip mobilized to site to contain the spill and effect clamping, it was not nice to note that the Agip did not involve the Okpoama people in the Joint Investigation Visit to ascertain the real cause of the spill. This is never the accepted practice in the oil industry. The host community ought to have been part of this investigation. ERA recommends that:

- 1 Agip follows up the recovery and clamping of linking pipeline and conduct proper clean up of the impacted environment
- 2 Agip takes steps to assess the extent of damage suffered by the community and fishing camps so as to pay commensurate compensation to the affected people.
- 3 The State Ministry of Environment should visit the impacted camps and community and ensure that it facilitates the process of clean up and compensation by Agip.