

Government of Bayelsa State of Nigeria



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Speaking out from Bayelsa's Brown Fields, Mangroves and Seas

By

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On the World Environment Day 2014

Perhaps unbeknownst to it, the world bore Bayelsa State of Nigeria in mind as it chose the theme for this year's World Environment Day, the UN's principal vehicle for raising global awareness and action on the environment: "Raise Your Voice, not the Sea Level". In support of the United Nations' earlier designation of 2014 as the Year of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), this year's WED focuses on SIDS. As our Earth faces the grim reality of increasing greenhouse effect, global warming, sea level rise, marine pollution and other ecological threats and climate change factors, nowhere is there a greater need to raise our voices, do our part, and hold all implicated actors to acceptable standards of environmental responsibility than in this most blessed but environmentally stressed piece of geography named Bayelsa State.

So existential has the challenge become for us. Starting, therefore, on this World Environment Day, Thursday the 5th of June, 2014, through a series of targeted initiatives, we shall raise our voices for good, nay give expression to the cries of our rising and flooding River Nun, the churning of our oil-polluted seas, the sighs of receding species, the flailing of felled forests, and the baleful bellowing in Bayelsa's brown fields, from Biseni to Bolou-Orua.

In Africa, at the southernmost tip of Nigeria and jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean lies one of the world's sublimest, most diversely bountiful and yet most fragile ecosystems. Named the Niger Delta, it has been described as the 'richest'

and amongst the three largest wetlands in the world. Its treasures include the rain and mangrove (Angala) forests that are home to over 450 km of coastline, and the rare and exotic species that are part of its unique biodiversity, including the Niger Delta red colobus and the pygmy hippopotamus. At the bottom and forming the core of this magnificent delta of small islands is Bayelsa State, home to several forest reserves (the Taylor Creek, Edumanon, Nun River Forest Reserves, etc), a network of rivers and creeks, and an overall low lying tender terrain. In trying to contextualize the fact that the state was the worst hit by the flood disaster of 2012 in Nigeria, a commentator characterized Bayelsa State as "the burrow pit of Nigeria".

The Niger Delta's ecosystem is under attack on many fronts. At an estimated annual rate of 3.3%, the delta is witnessing one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world, fast losing the varied benefits of forest cover, thanks to excessive logging, unrestrained and callously underpriced virgin land take - mostly for oil exploration activities, fuel wood ('fire wood') extraction, and debilitation from perennial oil pollution. Some of the timber species in the area, such as the abura, have plummeted to endangered levels, from decades of over-exploitation. Coastal erosion, seasonal flooding, indiscriminate sand mining, seaweed invasion, and saline water intrusion are some of the other ecological challenges, with coastal communities seeing average erosion rates of 20m per annum.

While the incidence of deforestation is by itself alarming, oil and gas exploration activities have visited the worst impact on the Niger Delta's land, water systems and biodiversity. I refer here to the ecocide that has been unleashed on our communities continually, almost on a daily basis, for over half a century by mega corporations such as Shell, Chevron and Agip in the course of petroleum exploration and extraction. According to Nigeria's National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA), in Bayelsa State alone over 804 oil spills were recorded in a two-year period, making an average of over one spill every day.

The environmental cost of hydrocarbon extraction to the people of Bayelsa State, in terms of the displacement of local livelihoods and economies; health disorders and a rising public health bill; impediments to our agricultural and tourism development; other climate change effects, and consequent tensions in the social fabric of our communities, is incalculable. Environmental degradation poses stark

implications for food security. For example, coco-yam is one traditional staple crop that is virtually going extinct. Already unlawfully dispossessed of their natural resources by a diseconomic legal-political order of the Nigerian State, our communities and their locals are rendered virtually hapless at their fate with under-regulated oil mining.

Three locations that exemplify the environmental irresponsibility of oil and gas mining corporations in Bayelsa State are Biseni, Brass and Koluama. Spills from oil wells operated by Shell and Agip respectively have created brown fields in the Biseni Clan. Agip's main legacy on the Brass Island is a canal which it has filled and coated with sludge from its production activities, daily for decades now. In January 2012, there was a blowout from Chevron's rig, the K S Endeavour, near Koluama community, disturbing the ecosystem and making life miserable for the impacted communities. In most or all of these cases, as in countless others, the corporate culprits have strenuously dodged responsibility, at best only throwing a few gestures of tokenism the way of some affected communities.

In recent years, some of our own folks have unscrupulously aggravated the environmental terrorism in the Niger Delta by vandalizing oil pipelines, siphoning crude oil, crudely 'distilling' it without any environmental considerations whatsoever (for local fuel supply), and releasing much of it back into the creeks and forests. This betrayal of our ecology joins up with a well-oiled international oil theft syndicate that places a heavy demand pull on illegal bunkering of petroleum, boring a big hole in the national revenue till and making this criminal enterprise a matter of high national economic and security implication. On the domestic side, the deliberate or unthoughtful exclusion of riverine distribution of petroleum products (to serve coastal communities) in the national petroleum product supply framework has rendered the coastal states vulnerable to the shadow political economy of illegal bunkering and artisanal oil 'refining'. That structural national failure is also an apt metaphor of Nigeria's gross inequity and iniquity against the petroleum host communities: the paradox of poverty - of petroleum products - in the midst of plenty.

Meanwhile, the toxic practice of gas flaring continues unabated across the length and breadth of Bayelsa, from the horizontal flares along the Yenagoa-Imiringi Road to the giant gas torches at Gbarain. But for recent development initiatives of the State Government, Oloibiri community where commercially viable oil mining

started in Nigeria in 1956, remains derelict like a used, abused, maltreated and jilted wife, after the then Shell-BP sucked out all the oil it wanted and abandoned the community with only the iron well heads still standing as relics of a better forgotten experience.

A report in The Guardian newspaper of the United Kingdom, in its 31st May 2010 edition, cites a survey that calculated in 2006 that up to 1.5 million tons of oil — 50 times the earlier record pollution unleashed in the Exxon Valdez tanker disaster in Alaska — was spilled in the Niger Delta over the past half century. The same report observed that:

"more oil is spilled from the delta ... every year than has been lost in the Gulf of Mexico [from] the explosion that wrecked BP's Deepwater Horizon rig ..."

As a BBC report of 15th June, 2010 titled "Nigeria [read Niger Delta/Bayelsa]: World Oil Pollution Capital" put it: "Site after site visited by the BBC - in both Bayelsa State and Ogoniland - had happened months before, and still not been cleaned up."

The offending companies are headquartered in advanced economies and democracies such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Netherlands and Italy, where they comply with the high environmental standards laid down by law. In Nigeria, in particular in Bayelsa State, they don't comply. Worsening matters, the Nigerian constitution practically denies spill-impacted communities and individuals any real access to justice, by attempting to vest judicial jurisdiction in such matters exclusively in the Federal High Court (rather than in the state courts as well). Only one judge of the Federal High Court is stationed in the entire Bayelsa State. A few years earlier there was none, and oil spill victims from Bayelsa had to go all the way to our sister Rivers State to file suits before the one judge (later two judges) covering both states then, and would wait for several years for trials to play out. This exclusionary structure therefore makes it easier for the corporate polluters to avoid responsibility.

The Bayelsa State Government under my administration is determined to stand as the environmental trustee of our communities. We intend to engage with these corporations to insist on adequate redress and remediation for our communities, seas and mangroves, preferably through amicable means and by all other lawful

measures where necessary. It is time for the extractive industry to plough back reasonable portions of their humongous profits into protecting the environments which they have so perforated in the course of their operations. But on behalf of the Environment and our communities, we also seek the strong support of the Federal Government of Nigeria and the international community, especially the UK and US Governments, the United Nations system and the justice institutions of the European Union, in holding these corporations and their parent companies to account for their environmental violations and to uphold global best practice in corporate social responsibility, equally in the mangroves of Bayelsa as in the North Sea/UK, in Norway or in the US along the Gulf of Mexico.

As charity begins at home, the Bayelsa State Government is on its part initiating a wide range of measures aimed at protecting our ecology and promoting environmentally sustainable development. To protect our rich forests, we have recently employed 168 forestry officers of various cadres, including forest guards. Towards the conservation and sustainable harnessing of our forestry resources, we shall soon along with the private sector and leading environmental NGOs be exploring feasible options for providing affordable alternative / renewable energy access for our people, especially at the community level.

Emerging from the 2012 flood disaster which caught our country flat-footed, and following the emergency relief and post-flood management interventions we undertook with the support of concerned bodies, we have commissioned studies towards the development of a flood management plan, which will form part of an eventual integrated coastal management plan. Like many other measures necessary for tackling our region's ecological demands, the full development and implementation of these plans will require robust inter-governmental and institutional collaboration. We count amongst many other local and international development partners the Niger Delta Development Commission as a prime candidate for such collaboration, as one of the major and explicit statutory mandates of that Commission is to deal with the environmental degradation of the region.

We are also building a strong partnership with NOSDRA and relevant global institutions on oil pollution control, remediation/restoration of polluted sites, and disaster risk reduction in relation to pipeline vandalization and illegal/unregulated refining of crude oil. Equally relevant in this regard is the Hydrocarbon Pollution

Restoration Project (HYPREP) fostered by the Federal Ministry of Petroleum Resources in the wake of the United Nations Environment Programmes's Environmental Assessment of Ogoni Land. These collaborations fall within our deliberate strategy of Collective Action to Restore the Environment (CARE), which is designed such that community-based actors will form its bulwark. CARE is a major plank of this Administration's Environmental Restoration and Governance Agenda.

To effectively drive this agenda and ensure enforcement, the institutional strengthening of the Bayelsa State Ministry of Environment and other reforms in the sector are a top priority for me. Another priority as we go forward is that all major government projects in the state shall be subjected to environmental impact assessment.

The environment is our common divine heritage, our vital life support system. It is our future. Even as the world progresses further into globalization on the economic front, it is in relation to the environment that our interdependency as a human community is most intrinsic. Increasingly, we see the global effects of local actions, requiring therefore global responses to local challenges, wherever appropriate. Bayelsa State as a responsible member of the global community is committed to restoring our environment to its fertile green vegetations, lovely blue seas and crystal air quality. This is how we can preserve our state as a treasure trove of biodiversity. This is how we can play our part in maintaining intergenerational equity; and this is how we can heed the call of the World Environment theme of 2014: "Raise Your Voice, not the Sea Level."

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