

THE NEXT GULF

*London, Washington and the
Oil conflict in Nigeria*

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and
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Preface

‘The struggle of humanity against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’, wrote the dissident Czech novelist Milan Kundera. Much of our intent in writing this book is to remember Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni struggle. The 10th November 2005 is the tenth anniversary of the execution of Saro-Wiwa, the writer and activist, and his eight Ogoni compatriots, Dr. Barinem Kiobel; John Kpuinen; Baribor Bera; Saturday Doobee; Nordu Eawo; Paul Levura; Daniel Gbokoo and Felix Nuate.

All the authors have been involved with the issues surrounding the Ogoni, the Niger Delta, Shell and the ecological and human rights impacts of oil, since the 1990s. James Marriott and Lorne Stockman of PLATFORM¹ have worked on the ecological and human impacts of oil for a decade. They were inspired by the Ogoni struggle and the tragedy of Saro-Wiwa’s death. Andy Rowell worked directly with Saro-Wiwa and assisted him in his campaign.

In the decade since those executions, we have all witnessed the tragedy of 9/11 and watched in horror at the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and at the wider war on terror. The pattern of global politics has radically altered, however in the Niger Delta it seems that the picture has remained the same. The villages and towns in the region are still locked into a cycle of extreme poverty, widespread unemployment, environmental pollution, and social injustice. The issues that Saro-Wiwa and

others fought for are as relevant today as they were when they died.

Moreover, the situation for many communities of the Delta has got worse since 1995. Ogoniland may not be under total military siege as it was then, but the military are still active. Ten years ago the principle behind the Ogoni struggle was non-violence. In the ten years since there has been an increase in armed resistance. Today the Delta is awash with arms, and hostage taking has become a regular occurrence. The profits from the theft of oil, which is called bunkering, fund conflict. The future has the potential to be far more violent. We examine the development of these shifts in Chapter One.

The most significant events in relation to the future of the Delta have not taken place within Nigeria. They have occurred in Washington where, following the events of 9/11, the Gulf of Guinea is seen as strategically important for the US's security of oil and gas supply. In Chapter Seven we examine how the Gulf of Guinea – which as a region encompasses not only Nigeria, but also other oil-producing states of Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and Gabon – is set to become a key source of American oil and gas. To become the replacement of, or counterbalance to, the Persian Gulf. To become the Next Gulf.

Nigeria is by far the biggest oil and gas producer in the Gulf, and we have focussed upon it and to a lesser extent São Tomé. The situation in Equatorial Guinea is a major story, but one which is beyond the scope of this book.

This shift in US foreign policy represents an acceleration of a longer-term trend. The transition of Nigeria from the British sphere of influence to the American sphere, that has been taking place since the decline of the British Empire in the 1940s. A new

axis of power has evolved. But in order to understand the current conflict in the Niger Delta it has to be seen in the light of its British colonial past. Chapter Two looks at the colonial exploitation of Nigeria and the Delta.

Chapter Three starts with the year that Shell-BP found oil in the Delta and examines some of the crises the company has faced including the Biafran War, nationalization of its BP share, community protests and the militarisation of its operations. Chapter Four explains the way the company and the oil industry has changed in the country over the last thirty years, and examines the inter-linked nature of the Nigerian state and the oil companies. Whilst Chapter Six examines how, despite Nigeria being renowned as a corrupt place to do business, much of the corruption is actually based in other countries.

Two themes underlie the entire book. The first is that Shell and the other oil corporations do not work alone. They are assisted by governments and a whole web of other companies, institutions and political groupings. Shell's interaction with these constituencies following crises in Nigeria is explored in Chapter Five.

The second is that the current pattern of oil and gas exploitation in the Delta carries a clear echo of the oldest relationship between America, West Africa and Europe: the Atlantic Triangle. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, that triangular economy existed between these three regions based upon slavery and the production of tropical goods such as sugar and rum. In the past four decades a new relationship between America, Europe and the Delta has emerged based upon oil and gas – a New Atlantic Triangle.

The first Atlantic Triangle impoverished West Africa, and enriched Europe and the cities of the American East Coast. The

authors fear that the New Atlantic Triangle is reviving this pattern at a scale – in speed and capital – that dwarfs the hopes of those working for a new start for Africa, working to Make Poverty History, and working to reinvent popular conceptions of the continent through the year-long cultural festival, Africa 05. The book concludes, in Chapter Eight, with an exploration of the possible futures of this triangle and the Delta in particular.

In that Chapter we give a series of recommendations, based on voices from the Delta. For we realize the limitations of a book on Nigeria written by three white, Northern-based authors. However we believe that what some will see as the book's limitation may also be its greatest strength. Our geographical, cultural and political location leads us to deliberately look at the relationships between London, Washington and Nigeria. It is easy for the governments of the North to dismiss the problems of Nigeria as home grown, but the majority of the companies and institutions benefiting from the exploitation in the country are based in Britain and the US.

We hope that the insight in this book will help people understand the truly inter-related nature of the oil business in Nigeria and enable them to assist the people of the Niger Delta in achieving what they want. All too often it is their voice that is silent in the debate. We hope we are helping their voices be heard.

The first Atlantic Triangle was dismantled by resistance in the villages of West Africa, by slave rebellions in the American plantations, and by the anti-slavery movement born in Britain. It may be that the New Atlantic Triangle will be similarly transformed by the actions of citizens in all three regions

We see this book as part of such a transformation, and we have created it together with a sister project 'Remember Saro-

Wiwa'.² Coordinated by PLATFORM, this brings together a coalition of groups including African Writers Abroad, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, PEN and Index on Censorship, to establish a permanent memorial to Saro-Wiwa and the issues he died for. A Living Memorial that remembers the past and shapes the future.

Whilst we have tried to be fair and objective in the book, we end each chapter with a small reflective piece that is more subjective, based upon the authors' personal experience. We see these as exploring the 'location' from which we write, and in doing so we draw strength from the words of Jon Snow, from Channel Four News, who has said: 'There's no such thing as a neutral human being. You've got to tell it as you see it, to take the side of justice and truth.'³