

Working in challenging locations

How we are addressing environmental and social concerns at two of our most important and challenging locations.

Nigeria

Interview with Basil Omiyi by Roger Hammond



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2006 saw an alarming escalation of violence in the Niger Delta. What is going on?

There are three issues. The first is poverty in the Delta. It is being addressed, but too slowly. The second is the way the Delta is represented in national politics. The third is the rise of organised crime, fuelled by large-scale thefts of crude oil. Think of these as overlapping circles – the bigger the overlap, the bigger the crisis.

The approach of the presidential election [Editor: April 2007] has made the current crisis so big.

The politically motivated militia groups continue to demand, among other things, the release of a former state Governor and of a militia leader held on treason charges, and a greater share of oil revenue for the Delta States.

The rise in violence is bad for the Delta and Nigeria. We have had to shut down most facilities in the Western Niger Delta, reducing production in 2006 by 50%. Militants have sabotaged flow stations and pipelines and made it impossible for us to get to many of these facilities to repair the damage or do normal maintenance. The Finance Ministry has estimated that the crisis cost the Government \$4.4 billion in lost revenue.

Fifty-four of our staff and contractors were kidnapped last year. Nine were killed in assaults or kidnappings. That is a terrible loss that I feel very deeply.

Isn't there a major risk that the Government will take a military approach that violates human rights?

I don't think so. It knows that being heavy-handed risks causing further incidents and losing local support. The Government's approach has been to lead with development, continue with dialogue and ultimately improve law and order.

Our role, as a company, is to support this effort and encourage government to respect human rights. I am proud of the way we are doing that with the two groups providing security in the Delta. One is the Supernumerary Police, seconded by the Nigeria Police Force. They

protect our facilities and are usually unarmed. We agree their terms of engagement, making sure they are in line with our security guidelines. We also run human rights training programmes for them and report any violations of our security standards.

The second group is the Joint Task Force. Its military personnel guard the handful of our facilities that are designated as national strategic assets. We make clear our stand on human rights to the Joint Task Force, including our commitment to the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights and our guidelines on the use of arms. All our frontline staff also do human rights training to help them follow our procedures and monitor the security staff guarding our facilities.

What are the chances for reconciliation with the Ogoni people?

Overall, I am cautiously optimistic. We left Ogoniland in 1993 and haven't produced oil there since. We still hold the concession including oil wells, which are still occasionally sabotaged or set on fire.

We have consistently said that we will only go back with community acceptance. To that end we continue to support the President's reconciliation initiative that is trying to find lasting peace and reconciliation in Ogoniland.

Government and the traditional rulers both tell us they want us to come back. In my meetings with Ogoni leaders they have talked about putting the past behind us and sitting around