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Nigerian bishops initiate forum on oil industry's impact

Patricia Lefevere | Mar. 25, 2011

Nigerian villagers point to an oil spill in a river in the Ogoni region of the Niger Delta June 10, 2010. (Reuters/Akintunde Akinleye)

ABUJA, NIGERIA -- Catholic bishops, state and local government officials, oil executives and representatives of nongovernmental agencies met in Port Harcourt, the corporate and logistic hub of Nigeria?s oil industry, to address the issues of poor governance and poor oil industry practices that have bedeviled the Niger Delta region for decades.

The bishops were responding to ?the cry of anguish coming from all segments of the population,? they wrote in a Statement of Intent following their Feb. 8-9 forum. The ?anguish,? they wrote, is evident in the people of the Niger Delta, ?especially those in rural communities who still suffer poverty, illiteracy and disease.?

The forum was initiated as part of the peace and justice work of the Nigerian Catholic Bishops? Conference, which asked the prelates of the regions ?to engage with these issues on behalf of the conference,? according to Fr. Edward Obi, secretary general of the Niger Delta Catholic Bishops? Forum and a cosigner of the Statement of Intent along with Archbishop Joseph Edra Ukpo of Calabar, chairman of the forum.

Of the 18 global oil firms that operate in the Niger Delta, only country managers from the Anglo-Dutch Shell Petroleum Development Company were invited to the forum. Shell is the largest operator of onshore wells in Nigeria. It was the first to arrive in Nigeria in 1937 and now accounts for 43 percent of total oil production. It is the operator of a joint venture that includes the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and the multinational petroleum firms Total and Agip.

At a future date other major oil companies like Chevron, ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips will be given similar opportunities to showcase and, if necessary, defend their activities in the Niger Delta, Obi said, noting the bishops plan to convene the forum twice yearly.

Besides Ukpo, bishops from the dioceses of Ogoja, Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, Port Harcourt, Bomadi and Warri attended the forum.

Shell was very satisfied with the forum, said Funkapo Fufeyin, the company?s in-country manager of

government and community relations, in an e-mail response to *NCR*.

In the time allotted to it, Shell gave a detailed presentation on its corporate responsibility efforts in the Niger Delta, Fufeyin said. The bishops asked probing questions and made constructive suggestions ?about how we could improve both our community development projects portfolio? and how to better communicate ?our achievements,? he said.

The bishops? statement said that they ?are suing for a future where all of our people would be proud beneficiaries of an industry that has such vast potential, but which has left them incapable of neither living their lives to the full nor being participants in the development of the region.?

Nigeria has been earning $282 million a day this year from its oil reserves, estimated at 34 billion barrels. These resources have made it the biggest oil producer in Africa, with the 10th-largest oil reserves in the world. Nigeria is the United States? fifth-largest oil supplier, accounting for about 8 percent of U.S. oil needs.

Thirty-one million people live in the Niger Delta. The needs of local people are all the more urgent, given the region?s ?unique endowment in oil and gas,? the bishops wrote.

?The truth is that the oil resources that fund the budgetary requirements of the federal government are derived from the South-South [Niger Delta] zone,? Obi told *NCR*.

?People here have a right to entertain the belief that they deserve more than is coming to them from the government, which is not commensurate by far with what they have to bear as a result of the oil industry,? said the priest, who holds a doctorate in theological ethics from the University of Louvain in Belgium.

Although the nine states that produce oil and gas receive 13 percent of the export revenues -- about $5.4 billion in 2007 -- the allocation has not improved education, health care or jobs for most individuals. Rates of infant mortality in the Niger Delta remain highest in the nation. Unemployment remains around 40 percent for 15- to 24-year-olds in the region.

The bishops chose to meet with corporate and government leaders at a time of relative peace, but crime, violence and armed militancy have plagued the region since the 1990s. Militant gangs of unemployed youth have attacked U.S. and European oil giants, kidnapping expatriates, local officials and even children. They have sabotaged oil facilities and pipelines, disrupting oil production by as much as 25 percent.

In response to the abductions and slowdowns in production, the government offered an amnesty to rebels in 2009, giving them cash for their weapons, which are plentiful in the Niger Delta, and the promise of job training and, for some, higher education.

According to Fufeyin, Shell is partnering with USAID/Nigeria and the Nigeria-based International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in a project to develop cassava farming. Shell is involved in training farmers, providing technical and business skills, offering high school and college scholarships, and supporting health facilities in the region, Fufeyin said.

The bishops? statement reiterated their commitment to working with the government and other stakeholders to promote job creation. They promised to continue the dialogue with communities, oil companies and the government to address key issues such as leadership lapses.

Their efforts are motivated by the desire to ?build on this understanding of human dignity, divine providence and the common good,? they wrote.

Whether the apparent tranquility existing at the time of the forum holds is anyone?s guess. Raids on oil installations have occurred in three previous civilian elections in Nigeria since 1999 and new violence has erupted this month in Port Harcourt and elsewhere in the region as the country prepares to vote April 9 (*NCR*, March 18).

Environmental damage to the Delta region was another paramount concern during the forum, *NCR* was told. Oil spills, gas flaring and deforestation continue to threaten the health and livelihoods of the 60 percent of people in the Delta who make their living in farming and fishing. Land degradation, brought about in large part by the oil industry, has contributed to unsafe drinking water and toxic air and waterways.

Shell oil managers attending the forum said that the number and volume of oil spills in Nigeria ?remains unacceptably high,? and claimed that 98 percent of the volume spilled in 2009 was caused by sabotage, militant action or oil thieves.

In an e-mail to *NCR*, Fufeyin called the cleanup effort ?a huge challenge? because of ?lack of access to the spill sites due to the security situation or interference by local communities.?

The Shell executives defended the company?s efforts to reduce gas flaring -- the open-air fires that burn the natural gas released when oil is extracted from the ground. Flaring, which has been illegal in Nigeria since 2008, has been linked to respiratory illnesses and cancers and to endangering local ecosystems through the emission of large amounts of greenhouse gases.

The oil executives cited militant attacks on its staff and facilities and a lack of funds from the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation as hampering their efforts to further reduce gas flaring.

Late last year Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja decried Shell?s use of misleading information that blamed the bulk of oil pollution on thugs operating in the Niger Delta. ?Shell should not do in the Niger Delta what it would not do in the North Sea,? Onaiyekan said.

The archbishop, along with leading human rights and environmental groups, have urged the Nigerian government oil regulators to get tough with companies who operate the wells.

?It?s good to have the bishops of the region champion the issues that people have raised over services, governance, ecological destruction and poverty in the midst of wealthy resources,? said Lydia Onyeka of Catholic Relief Services in Abuja, who helped arrange the forum.

What?s ?unique,? she said, was that all 30 of the people who met recognized ?their common interest, their common need for security and that they share a common environment.?

[Patricia Lefevere is a longtime *NCR* contributor.]

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