
Pipeline disaster in the making

BY KORINNA HORTA

The hanging of Nigerian environmentalist Ken Saro-Wiwa two years ago sparked a worldwide protest against his government and the oil companies responsible for environmental degradation of Nigeria's Ogoniland region.

Now, an international consortium including Exxon, Shell and Elf is planning a multibillion-dollar oil drilling and pipeline project in Chad and Cameroon that also carries serious potential environmental and social risks.

Many fear the project may create another Ogoniland, the Nigerian oil development debacle. The oil companies, which plan to use public assistance from the World Bank and other U.S. taxpayer-backed agencies, would be wise to re-examine the lessons of that disaster.

The oil consortium seeks to develop the Doba oil fields in landlocked southern Chad, and build a 600-mile pipeline through Cameroon to transport the oil to an Atlantic port. As in Nigeria, this development is taking place in what is potentially an environmental and political minefield.

The Doba region has long been the seat of an ethnic and regional struggle against Chad's central government, a government closely associated with neighboring Sudan, which the U.S. government accuses of supporting terrorism.

The promise of oil wealth in southern Chad risks re-igniting smoldering tensions. According to the State Department's recent human rights report, the governments of both Cameroon and Chad are responsible for serious human rights violations.

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The underground pipeline will pass through ecologically fragile rain-forest areas, including one that is home to a Pygmy population of traditional hunters and gatherers. Once development begins, an uncontrollable influx of people in search of work will occur at construction sites. Deforestation, wildlife poaching and the loss of local village farm land will likely result.

The pipeline itself, even with the use of state-of-the-art equipment, poses a danger of groundwater contamination and pollution of some of the most important river systems. Massive environmental degradation from oil development in Nigeria continu-

ally fueled the massive uprising that led to Mr. Saro-Wiwa's arrest and execution.

An environmental assessment is being carried out and an environmental panel was put in place to examine potential problems and suggest solutions. But the best environmental reports are of little help when the governments involved are incapable of carrying out their recommendations.

The government of Cameroon itself stands accused by the World Bank of financial mismanagement, having apparently lost track of revenues from its own offshore oil production. In Chad, foreign investors have long lost any trust in the government's ability to handle the country's finances. At the investors' insistence, Chad's treasury was placed under the control of a Swiss firm for several years.

The World Bank says the project will alleviate poverty because oil revenue for Chad and royalties for Cameroon would be invested in poverty programs desperately needed in both countries.

But, as in Nigeria, the people of Chad and Cameroon may derive little or no benefit from oil development, and may instead turn on both the oil companies that take over their environment and the governments that enable the development.

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