



# The Next Gulf

Simon Pirani

*The Next Gulf: London, Washington and Oil Conflict in Nigeria* (London, Constable, 2006) by Andy Rowell, James Marriott and Lorne Stockman.

A new generation of popular militia is taking shape in the Niger Delta in south east Nigeria, around demands for greater local control of the oil-rich region's natural resources. The most prominent organisation, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), is made up largely of young men from the Ijaw, the Delta's largest ethnic group. MEND's tactic of choice is kidnapping foreign oil workers: there were reports of more than 60 hostages being taken in 2006, of whom one was killed, one injured and all others returned unharmed.

The kidnapers' demands are aimed at the multinational oil companies, at corrupt local government, and at releasing arrested leaders. Those who in January this year seized 24 Filipino seamen (later released unharmed) asked Shell to pay \$1.5 billion to the residents of the Bayelsa state in the Delta, "as compensation for oil production-related pollution". Those who took four Italian oil company Agip employees, three Italians and one Lebanese (later released unharmed), demanded the release from prison of militia leader Asari Dokubo and local politician Diepreye Alamieyeseigha; an accounting by "corrupt" state governments of what they had done with £1.2 billion worth of oil revenues accumulated since 2000; and that members of those administrations be barred from standing as election candidates.

The call to free Alamieyeseigha is an anomaly, a reminder of the complicated local politics of the Delta, which are hard to understand from a distance. He is the leader of a rebellious clique in the ruling political party led by president Olusegun Obasanjo, and wanted in the UK on charges of laundering millions of dollars. Nevertheless, the demands in general seem moderate to me, when I recall the Delta, to which I travelled in 2003. It was shocking not for its extreme poverty – no more or less mind-numbing than poverty I'd seen elsewhere – but for the fact that forty years of oil production had not made the slightest dent in that poverty. In many respects, it has made things worse. Oil spills poison water

supplies for communities that rely on that water to live; the spills are not cleaned up properly and the effects last for years. Oil companies fund community projects that too often go wrong, that development agency staff view with contempt, and that add insult to communities' injury ... while the money goes to local elites' foreign bank accounts or to buy guns for criminal gangs. While most people in the Delta – like most people in Africa – are without electricity, billions of cubic metres of gas that could produce electricity are instead flared, polluting rain clouds and damaging crops. (The gas comes out of the ground with the oil, and flaring, i.e. setting light to it at the wellhead, is the cheapest way to dispose of it – to date, the gas flared is "more than the UK's total natural gas reserves in the North Sea in 2004".<sup>1</sup>)

Before going to the Delta, I read so many hundreds of pages of propaganda by oil companies, about what great neighbours they are to local people, that I started to wonder whether community groups and NGOs that monitor oil industry abuses weren't exaggerating a little, to make their just case to the outside world. The reality was actually far, far worse than their protests had conveyed.<sup>2</sup>

Take Umuechem, a 10,000-strong community near which Shell built an oil flow station. In 1990, after a quarter of a century of oil production, Umuechem still had no running water, electricity or secondary schools. When local people staged a peaceful protest under Nigeria's brutal military dictatorship, Shell managers requested protection from the protestors and the notorious mobile police responded by killing more than 80 people, including some dragged from hospital beds. They burned Umuechem to the ground, destroying 495 homes. There is a dispute about the exact order of events: Shell says some young protestors staged an occupation of the flow station before managers called in the heavy mob, while a Human Rights Watch investigation concluded it was the other way round. In any case, monstrous repression was heaped on this peaceful, impoverished rural community for demanding even a small share of the oil wealth.

I visited Umuechem 13 years after the massacre

and four years after the military dictatorship had fallen. An official inquiry had by then ordered state compensation for the community, but not a penny had been paid. There was *still* no running water, no electricity and no secondary school. Shell had funded a water supply system, but it never worked, and women had to collect water from a polluted stream, the only water source. It's a typhoid risk, but their families have to drink something.

This humiliation, this cynical contempt for communities on whose land the oil was discovered, and this collective poisoning of the population, is the background against which, in the 1980s, protest movements arose in the Delta. These culminated in the confrontation between Shell and the Ogoni people that ended with the company withdrawing from the Ogoni region and the dictatorship executing the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other community leaders in November 1995. Two decades on, indignity piles upon indignity, the oil price has climbed higher, and young men in the Delta have taken to the gun.

Some join the politically-inspired militia such as MEND, which the Nigerian writer Ike Okonta calls "the violent child of the deliberate and long-running constriction of the public space [...] in which ordinary citizens, now reduced to penurious subjects, can exercise their civil and political rights".<sup>3</sup> Others join criminal gangs that sabotage oil installations or steal huge volumes of oil from pipelines ("bunkering"), filling whole tankers offshore, and often adding to the environmental damage. Still others engage in ethnic clashes or are recruited by local elites to do their dirty work.

The web of connections through which the Delta is linked to the centres of world capitalism is the subject of *The Next Gulf*. Where Okonta and another Nigerian campaigner, Oronto Douglas, passionately set out the Delta's case against the oil companies,<sup>4</sup> the authors of *The Next Gulf* follow up with a survey of the connections, collusion and complicity of governments and markets in the north. They show how the oil companies' pillage of the Delta was built on a history of colonial exploitation: they argue that the 17th- and 18th-century "Atlantic triangle" (consumer

Oil tank construction. Port Harcourt, Nigeria

goods and guns from Europe to Africa, slaves to America, tobacco and rum to Europe) has been superseded by a more complex “new Atlantic triangle” – investment from Europe and the US in to Nigeria; oil and liquefied natural gas the other way; oil proceeds from the US to Europe; corrupt funds and capital flight from Nigeria to Europe. They show how the City of London and other financial centres not only fund the oil companies, but also provided the conduit for the looting of billions of oil dollars from Nigeria’s state budget by the late dictator Sani Abacha and others, and the mechanisms used by lavish bribery schemes operated by oil company executives and Nigerian officials. They show how the oil companies, vulnerable in the global north to criticism of their barbaric behaviour in the global south, responded to the outrage of their employees, their customers and of public opinion over the killing of Saro-Wiwa with a cynical PR exercise that gave birth to the fraud of “corporate social responsibility”. The authors provide both an overview and substantiating detail, down to the addresses of crooked lawyers and the career paths of Shell Nigeria’s bosses, backed with references.

The book’s final argument, alluded to in its title, is that the would-be masters of the universe in Washington DC – the State Department wallahs, oil company lobbyists, think tanks and neo-conservative consultants – are urging the US administration to consider a military build up in the Gulf of Guinea, largely with a view to safeguarding energy resources in Nigeria, Sao Tome and Equatorial Guinea. Moreover, they are being listened to, and there have been joint US-Nigerian naval manoeuvres. All this makes *The Next Gulf* vital reading for those in the north who feel themselves to be part of movements to change the world and challenge those who rule it, and who believe that that involves uniting with resisters and fighters in the south.

My question to *The Next Gulf*’s authors is about their hesitancy in analysing and contextualising the new form of imperialism they describe so well. There’s no hint at what sort of ideas will enable us (I mean we, who want to change the world) to understand this imperialism and ways to resist it. They want their readers to hear what voices from the Delta say, and that’s important; but their own conclusions are disappointingly vague: Rowell describes “the dreadful feeling that the international community had let Ken [Saro-Wiwa] down. I still believe that we failed him in his darkest hour” (p. 40). The international community of who or what? Obviously not the same one as the oil companies’. ... Marriott writes: “This is our Empire. We were born in it, we inherited it, its comforts and cruelties. This is our Empire, ours to retreat from, and ours to dismantle. I try to imagine a life without oil”.<sup>5</sup> In which respect is this empire ours? Who are “we”? How do we retreat from or dismantle empire?

Perhaps this is partly a generation thing. When I became politically active in the early 1970s, everyone told me that changing the world involved reading theory, and specifically, Marx and the Marxists. The activism that *The Next Gulf*’s authors are involved in – the alliance of environmental and social protest sometimes called the “anti-global-capitalism” movement – appeared in the 1990s, on the back of the USSR’s collapse and the so-called “death of socialism”. (The authors are prime movers in the Remember Saro-Wiwa campaign, and two of them are affiliated with Platform ([www.platformlondon.org](http://www.platformlondon.org)), a combative NGO that aims at “environmental and social justice”.)

It’s dangerous to generalise, but I’d say that some “anti-global-capitalism” activists, on the rebound from the alleged failures of grand socialist narratives, eschew theory for a let’s-get-things-done approach. And they *do* get things done: many single-issue NGOs rooted in this movement are sufficiently tenacious, and expert, that governments and international institutions listen to, and fear, them. Nevertheless, a book about the economic and social connections of

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which the new imperialism is composed, bereft of analytical context and its concepts, has its cutting edge blunted. *The Next Gulf*’s authors don’t need a lecture from me about the value of reading Marx ... or writers on imperialism from the south, from Jose Carlos Marategui and Walter Rodney to Kwame Nkrumah and Edward Said. Rather, I’ll press my point with a couple of examples.

First, corruption and transparency. One of *The Next Gulf*’s strongest chapters gives an account of corrupt relationships (involving, specifically, payment of bribes, opaque disposal of revenues and laundering of funds alienated from Nigerian state) between oil companies, money markets and Nigerian regimes. The issue is not politically neutral: demands for transparency are used by the US and other great powers, and not only in Nigeria, to keep local elites on a tight leash. (The neo-con Paul Wolfowitz, now in charge of the World Bank, is accused by development experts of just such a use of the ideas of transparency and anti-corruption.) *The Next Gulf*’s authors quote Pamela Bridgewater, US ambassador to Ghana, on the need for oil industry transparency in order to enhance US energy security,<sup>6</sup> and point out: “Transparency thus [in her hands] becomes a means to an end, not an end in itself.” Right. But then what is transparency for us, who want to change the world? I’d venture that it’s not an end in itself for us either.

Do we believe that the state has a greater right than private capital to control revenues generated by oil production on land robbed from the Delta’s people, at the expense of its communities and their environment, and against their will? Do we believe the megaprofits are more properly assigned to Shell’s north American and European shareholders, or filched by corrupt Nigerian officials? I’m almost neutral on both counts. Transparency, though, is a powerful weapon for organisation by communities, whether in Nigeria or in the north, by oil workers, by campaigners, in the context of positing *our* control of resources against that of both state and private capital. One of the most interesting passages in *The Next Gulf* reports the National Political Reform Conference in Nigeria in 2005, where exactly these issues were discussed. Oronto Douglas called for “total resource control, which is about allowing the communities and the people to be in charge of their lives”.<sup>7</sup> The Delta-based journalist Patrick Naagbantou said of greater derivation (a larger proportion of oil revenues going to local government): “My trouble is with accountability and good governance. It is OK to have greater derivation, but not if it is under the same governance system. Then there is no point, as the people will never see any of the money”.<sup>8</sup> In this context, transparency makes sense as an organising issue. How that can be developed on an international scale needs to be considered in its proper context.

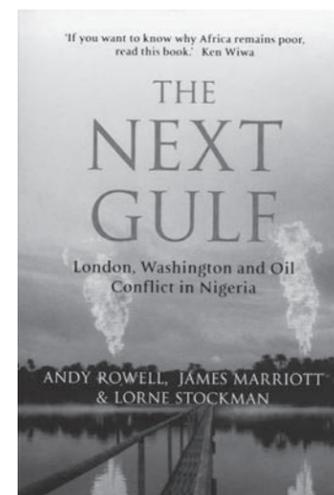
A similar point may be made about debt relief. *The Next Gulf*’s authors argue that, for governments and policymakers of the north, debt relief is “not only a tool for reducing poverty” but also “a tool for resource exploitation”,<sup>9</sup> and that Nigeria’s 2005 deal – which was loaded with the understanding that Nigeria would make its energy resources even more open to exploitation by multinationals – was very much a double-edged sword,<sup>10</sup> until then

the most indebted nation in Africa. It’s a point that needs developing, especially in view of the U2 singer Bono’s politically obscene and widely-publicised assertion that the deal confirmed Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as the “Lennon and McCartney of development”. How does the new imperialism use debt to keep the Nigerian and other African elites at its beck and call? What place does the issue have in the broader totality of relationships that enable the oil companies to trample Delta communities? How will these be challenged? What part can people in the north play? All this deserves a more robust analytical framework.

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### Notes

- 1 *The Next Gulf: London, Washington and Oil Conflict in Nigeria* (London, Constable, 2006) by Andy Rowell, James Marriott and Lorne Stockman, p.67.
- 2 I wrote a section on Shell’s relations with Delta communities to a report by Christian Aid, *Behind the Mask: the real face of corporate social responsibility*. <<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/indepth/0401csr/index.htm>>
- 3 Full article at <[http://www.blacklooks.org/2006/10/behind\\_the\\_mask\\_-\\_emergence\\_of\\_mend\\_in\\_the\\_niger\\_delta.html](http://www.blacklooks.org/2006/10/behind_the_mask_-_emergence_of_mend_in_the_niger_delta.html)>. See also <<http://www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/38005>>
- 4 Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil in the Niger Delta* (London, Verso, 2003).
- 5 *The Next Gulf: London, Washington and Oil Conflict in Nigeria* (London, Constable, 2006) by Andy Rowell, James Marriott and Lorne Stockman, p. 246.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 219.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 186.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 226-227.



Platform: [www.platformlondon.org](http://www.platformlondon.org)