

## Nigerians dying at 40 in Niger Delta?

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Oil spills are common in the Nigerian Delta. Identifying the cause of this pollution is not an easy task in a complex and violent region, where responsible parties continually pass the buck. While oil companies talk of sabotage, environmentalists and human rights organizations insist on the negligence of companies who neither maintain nor monitor their facilities to satisfaction.

Shell has acknowledged that 14,000 tonnes of crude was spilled in 2009. The main oil company in Nigeria is responsible for over 6,800 spills, the equivalent of 400,000 tonnes, of oil into the waters and once rich soils of the Delta region between 1976 and 2001.

"Oil spills in the Niger Delta are not necessarily dramatic, but numerous and constant," says Daniele Gosteli Hauser, head of economics and human rights at the Swiss section of Amnesty International.

The uncountable oil spills continue to spell deadly consequences for both the environment and the 31 million inhabitants of the Niger Delta region.

### **Life expectancy**

"The water they use for washing or cooking is polluted, fish is scarce and contaminated. Agricultural lands are unfit for cultivation. And the air is polluted by flaring or the burning of natural gas out of oil," she adds.

Life expectancy of local people has dropped to just 40 years.

According to Amnesty International, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta do not benefit from the oil manna in any way. Instead, they suffer the worst consequences.

"Whilst they live in what was once one of the richest ecosystems on the planet, the inhabitants of the Niger Delta suffer the consequences of one of the worst contaminations in the world", says the outraged head of Amnesty.

Indeed, they are yet to enjoy the \$600 billion profits from their oil. "Black gold from the Niger Delta accounts for 95% of export earnings and 80% of the country's income.

Nigeria, the eighth exporter of crude oil, provides 40% of the United States' total crude imports.

## Shell dodges

According to Shell, the region's main oil company, the leaks are mainly caused by pipeline sabotage that account for an 80 per cent loss.

Sunday, the Anglo-Dutch oil group bemoaned a recent rise in acts of vandalism against its pipelines in southern Nigeria.

They have become the target of repeated attacks carried out by armed groups who claim to fight for a fairer distribution of oil revenues.

However, environmental protection and rights organizations disagree with this explanation. For them, the company has its share of responsibility in the Niger Delta pollution.

Daniele Gosteli Hauser argues that "There are sabotages and thefts, but the proportions mentioned by the companies are not credible. It is above all the lack of maintenance of facilities that is causing the leaks.

"Shell has a lot to gain by presenting the leaks as a result of sabotage in order to dodge responsibility and not have to pay for cleaning or compensation."