

Nigeria launches clean-up in devastated oil spill region

June 2 2016, by Ola Awoniyi With Joel Olatunde Agoi In Lagos



Environmental devastation to farming and fishing in the Niger Delta has for many come to symbolise the tragedy of Nigeria's vast but squandered oil wealth

Nigeria's vice-president on Thursday launched a \$1 billion oil pollution clean-up programme in the Niger delta, after President Muhammadu Buhari pulled out of visiting the restive region.

Yemi Osinbajo stood in for Buhari, who had been due to attend the

ceremony in the Ogoniland area of Rivers state in what would have been his first visit to the delta as president.

The presidency gave no reason for the sudden change in plan but it comes in the wake of an upsurge in militant attacks on key oil infrastructure in the creeks and swamps of the oil-producing south.

Buhari has ordered enhanced security around installations while the military has called the Niger Delta Avengers, which has claimed responsibility for the attacks, "economic terrorists".

The attacks have cut production to 1.4 million barrels per day, heaping fresh misery on a crude-dependent economy already crippled by the global slump in oil prices.

Security challenges have long been linked to environmental devastation to farming and fishing blamed on the oil industry, as well as under-development of the delta region.

Long task

In August 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said Ogoniland may require the world's biggest-ever clean-up after a succession of oil spills.

Osinbajo pledged the government would reverse the damage: "We are determined to put right the wrongs of the past."

He added: "The restoration that is going to take place here is not just the restoration of your land but the restoration of fishing, your farming and health."

But experts believe the restoration of ecosystems could take up to 25

years to complete.

UNEP's incoming executive director Erik Solheim, said: "The task to clean up Ogoniland will neither be easy nor fast but it needs to be done.

"If we succeed here, it will demonstrate that degraded environments can be restored, sending a signal to many other communities around the world that peaceful cooperation can lead to positive outcomes."



Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari has ordered enhanced security around oil installations in the Niger Delta after an upsurge in militant attacks

Soil, water contamination

Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell was forced to quit Ogoniland in 1993

because of community unrest led by the activist Ken Saro-Wiwa over pollution and chronic under-development.

Saro-Wiwa was executed in 1995 by Nigeria's then-military regime on what his supporters believe were trumped-up murder charges of four Ogoni chiefs.

Shell was forced to pay compensation to Ogoni farmers and fishermen in the Bodo community who lost their livelihoods because of spills after a landmark court action in Britain in 2015.

The firm has been accused of not doing enough to prevent pollution and clean up spills in the delta, although it has always blamed sabotage.

The managing director of Shell's Nigerian subsidiary, Osagie Okunbor, said at the launch ceremony the company was "committed to cleaning the spills in Ogoniland".

"Shell will work with all stakeholders in the implementation of the UNEP report," published in 2011 and which highlighted severe and widespread soil and ground water contamination, he added.

The report also found drinking [water contamination](#) and devastated ecosystems in the delta, such as mangroves, and slammed the industry and government for not doing enough to tackle the problem.

Not just spills

Ledum Mitee, a former president of Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), welcomed the government's commitment to finally implement the UNEP report's recommendations.

But he said it should go further, given the extent of the pollution and the

unresolved grievances of locals.

"Clearly the Ogoni struggle is not just about clearing and cleaning the spills. Ken Saro-Wiwa did not die because of a UNEP report, I did not go to jail because of it either," he told AFP.

"There should be conscious measures to address the issue of neglect and marginalisation, under-development and economic exploitation. These are fundamental issues.

"These are core issues that encourage militancy and restiveness in the region. That's why... you see a resurgence of violence in the region."

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