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New York Times Editorial

Blood and Oil

Just as things seemed to be calming down in the delta region of Nigeria after a spate of kidnappings and insurgent attacks, the militant group calling itself the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta — MEND — announced last week to all who would listen that it was planning new violence against oil facilities in the region. Apparently unconcerned about tipping its hand to the authorities, MEND even gave a date for the start of its new campaign: April 25.

The guerrillas could not have hoped for a better reaction. Crude oil prices immediately jumped on the news, hitting \$70 a barrel, as new fears about a supply squeeze hit the global oil market. Adding to the concern is that the latest message, sent to various news organizations, seems a lot angrier and more violent than previous missives. The references to endless buckets of blood sounded more like an Al Qaeda rant than a threat from oil-market saboteurs.

This really should serve notice to Olusegun Obasanjo, president of Africa's most populous country, Nigeria. MEND's tactics — kidnapping oil workers, attacking facilities, killing government soldiers — are despicable, and deserve international condemnation. But the demand for more local control over oil wealth cannot be dismissed just because of its source.

Ever since Royal Dutch Shell discovered oil in the Niger Delta back in 1956, revenue from oil wells has gone to line the pockets of Nigeria's elite: military dictators and corrupt federal and local government officials. Very little has gone to help the impoverished communities in the delta, which remain among the poorest in the world. Environment degradation, caused by oil slicks and gas flares, has gone untreated.

Under Nigerian law, oil revenues go to the federal government, which then passes on a percentage to the states. In 2004, for instance, the 36 Nigerian states received \$6.2 billion. Supposedly, about one-third of that went to the four major oil-producing states. But thanks to theft, corruption and mismanagement, on both the federal and state levels, very little of that money reached the local communities.

Traveling through the delta region, it is difficult to comprehend that this is actually an area wealthy in natural resources. Despite generating hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue since oil was discovered, the Niger Delta is one of the poorest and least developed parts of the country. A Wall Street Journal article last week described Warri, the western delta's oil capital, as a "crime-ridden sprawl of rutted streets and cinderblock shops." Lydia Polgreen of The Times reported earlier this year on Obioku, an impoverished delta village that is completely isolated. "With no fast boats available, the nearest health center or clinic is a day's journey away," Ms. Polgreen wrote. "No telephone service exists here. Radio brings the only news of the world outside. Nothing hints that the people here live in a nation enjoying the profits of record-high oil prices."

It is time for Nigeria's government to begin taking into account the plight of the people who live around the oil wells that have sustained the country for so long.