

Statement

from the crew of *Sweet Crude* after release from Nigerian SSS Detention

Sunday, April 20, 2008

We want to begin with the most important message, which is our deep gratitude for all of the support, tireless work and commitment to securing our release from the Nigerian State Security Services. We'd like to specifically thank Senators Maria Cantwell and Jon Tester for their immediate and swift action on our behalf. Additionally, we'd like to express our thanks to the 12 other Senators and Representatives who signed and delivered a letter on our behalf to the Nigerian President Y'Ardua. We have been informed that this level of Congressional support is unprecedented. We would also like to acknowledge the US Ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Sanders, who courageously advocated for our release with the highest security authorities in Nigeria. We commend the staff of the US Consular Division in Abuja for their vigilant work to secure what was by Nigerian terms a swift release. In particular, we are grateful to Victoria Coffineau who was literally our lifeline during our detention. And most specifically, we want to acknowledge our friends and family for their relentless pursuit of justice on our behalf. It is impossible for us, at this early stage of homecoming, to even begin to grasp the reach and depth of support we've received. During the most difficult hours of detention, we resolutely knew that you were all feverishly and effectively doing all you could to bring us home and it literally was what got us through. To all of you, we can only say the most sincere thank you.

We'd like you to know that you extended your influence, support and reputations for people who, contrary to reports from the Nigerian Government, were doing work in the Niger Delta lawfully, responsibly, honorably and with all proper permission and advanced notification to all authorities necessary. The Nigerian Government has continued to claim that we were in a location that required advanced authorization and permitting. One report went so far as to claim that we did not even secure visas prior to our arrival. This is entirely false.

The facts are as follows: We have been working in and out of the Niger Delta since November of 2005 openly, with a very careful commitment to knowing who's who and what's what in the complex world of the Niger Delta. We entered the country with business visas and letters of invitation stating explicitly that we would be filming to complete Sweet Crude. Nigerian law, prior to our detention, did not state that special permits were needed for any travel within the country. This is an excuse posed after the fact and directly intended to be an intentional systematic and dangerous suppression of journalism in the Niger Delta. Moreover, we know that had we applied to the Joint Task Force or JTF, with a complete itinerary of our every location, it could have put us at further risk rather than secured our safety. The JTF is a Nigerian military task force specifically put in place to police—or as most Niger Delta residents see it, to militarize—the Niger Delta because of the oil there.

It is important to understand that it is widely known that many soldiers in the JTF are corrupt, and are in fact themselves involved in oil bunkering and ransom deals for hostages while they abuse their power to play both of sides of

the fence. As responsible journalists, we have developed relationships with locals in the communities where we have been filming. In a place like the Niger Delta, with the stakes so high, the players so numerous and loyalties so difficult to discern, it is imperative that the work be done to learn who can be trusted. At the time that we were intercepted by the JTF, we were traveling with our dear colleague, Nigerian-American, Joel Bisina, to his childhood village in Egbema. Joel has been clear with us that traveling to local villages with members of the JTF is neither wise nor safe. To do so would place the people living in those communities at risk, hinder people's trust to work with us and place ourselves in the hands of the entity most interested in preventing us from telling the world the true story of what is occurring in an area producing more of U.S. oil than Saudi Arabia.

At 9:00 am on Saturday, April 12th, the five of us were together in a boat with our camera bags zipped and packed away. Even though military rule officially ended in Nigeria in 1999, the Niger Delta, for all intents and purposes, continues to be an occupied land. We approached a JTF checkpoint and were instructed to pull over. Joel exchanged words with the officer on duty. In their interaction, what started as routine harassment by the JTF of a local Nigerian man who understood all too well that he was implicitly being asked for money, Joel decided not to capitulate. He was bringing four of his colleagues to complete filming for a documentary and to meet his mother. He argued with the officer, reminding him that he had every right to lawfully travel to his village with his friends. In response, the JTF officer ordered all of us out of the boat to go inside

and wait in the Commanding Officer's headquarters. Then this routine harassment turned into our bags being searched and the situation shifted to the target being us as well as Joel. At first we were told we were being held for our own safety. "How could they know if we were being kidnapped by Joel?", they said. And even if we weren't, they needed to stop us from going to a dangerous place. This is fully disingenuous.

In all the time that we were detained, not one officer ever asked one of us if we felt unsafe or were being held hostage. In fact, when I first discussed our situation with an SSS or State Security Services officer about why we were being detained, he said smugly "If you are heading into the creeks and don't feel unsafe, that must mean you know locals, so we know who you are." What is meant by this is that Americans working to tell the story of what people in the Niger Delta say is their just right to have control over the way oil is produced and revenue distributed, not to mention political representation and constitutional issues—that when these Americans come to do this work, they are considered spies by the Nigerian government. All of this is part of a pattern. Nigerian authorities have been systematically harassing, detaining and arresting foreign and domestic journalists to send a message that no one should come to report about the Niger Delta.

At 2:00 pm on Saturday, April 12th, after a series of excuses about why we were still being held, including because there were no life jackets in the boat—a laughable idea in a place where no one has life jackets on boats—they searched our bags. The second they saw cameras in our bags, they signaled to call their

superior officers to escalate the case. Within two hours, the five of us were being driven to an army base in Warri, when I overheard there would be an arrest number and a charge of sabotage.

Fortunately, they had not confiscated our cell phones and Tammi was able to text about our situation in depth until the next difficult moment of escalation, when we were told we would be taken to Abuja and our cell phones were confiscated. By getting the word out early, our incredible team here put a series of steps in motion that really saved us, and I mean literally. No one would tell me why we were being arrested or what we were being charged with. In fact we were never given an answer in earnest to this question, or to why we were denied access to communication or attorneys. It was only when one officer turned control of us over to another and we heard the words, "They are your prisoners now" that we knew for certain we were indeed prisoners.

Contrary to reports from the Nigerian government that we were flown to Abuja, we were not flown; but rather driven in two trucks with six heavily armed soldiers in each truck on a 7 ½ hour harrowing ride through the night and numerous check points. Ironically, one of the biggest warnings on the US State Department website is not to drive at night in Nigeria. We now know why. For us, one of the saddest parts of this was the reckless danger that those young soldiers were placed in to accompany people who were to be illegally detained, who the JTF knew full well were not a security risk to their nation. In Abuja, the JTF turned us over to the SSS.

We want to explain in very brief detail the difficulty of being detained by the SSS in Nigeria because we are keenly aware that what we experienced is only a small taste of the unimaginable brutality that has been leveled on Nigerians who have come before us. The SSS and Nigerian government are renowned for fabrication of evidence and facts of cases. Our State Department was doing their best work; but they were up against consistent misinformation and an inability to meet with us privately during the duration of our detainment. Therefore, our intent is to shed light on what a Nigerian man who apologized to us as we were leaving the country called “the last gasps of the dark days of a few men owning so much that they would do anything to keep people from talking about it.” He asked us to come back and tell you that it is only with something like this incident that American attention can help to sway the Nigerian government toward due process and demilitarization.

In this context we think it’s important to tell you a little bit about the reality of our detention. From the moment we were asked for our cell phones, we had no contact with the outside world for five full days, with the exception of two visits from the US consular office—witnessed by the very SSS officers who were our jailers and interrogators. In other words, we could not be open with our lifeline. We had sporadic access to food and water, particularly worrisome for our team member Joel, who is diabetic and was denied access to his medication for over two days. We were housed in spaces with various amounts of control, mostly none, over temperature, which varied from 60 to 100 degrees by our estimation.

After only two hours of sleep, we were woken for anywhere from four to eight hours of interrogation.

While we had different experiences, each of us was interrogated anywhere from one to four times, with anywhere from reasonable tactics to psychologically and borderline physically abusive tactics. We were subjected to low level ridicule, good cop/bad cop mind games, and a stream of misinformation or no information intended to be maddening. While there are more details and personal difficulties in this process, we reiterate that we are sadly aware that this is nothing in comparison to what others have gone through. We will be fine and do not mean to harp on our ordeal—our suffering is just so relatively minimal.

We are all very aware as the days played out that it is only because of the tremendous pressure brought by all of you that we were released within one week rather than detained for more than a month. They were extremely clear with us that they wanted to send a strong message. They did not mince words with me that I should pay, and so should my film crew, for having the nerve to come to the Niger Delta to make a documentary. Given that you took a risk to support us personally, we would like to leverage that hard work to shed light on the principle for which you fought.

I have worked in my life on projects related to due process, illegal detentions and even the Japanese American incarcerations in the 1940's. What were intellectual and philosophical commitments have become very differently personal. Being seized at gunpoint because the authorities do not like what you are saying and want you to shut you up is a staggeringly terrifying experience.

And even though I cannot imagine in precisely what ways, I know, and we know, that this has materially changed us.

During the time that we were detained and interrogated, we learned later, the price of oil had hit a record high. But it is only now, we feel, that each of us has actually paid the true price of oil. It is this loss of humanity necessary to maintain power structures where violence, militarization, environmental devastation and corruption are the downstream consequences of our current oil infrastructure. This is it. Things have got to change. If our experiences could bring even the smallest improvement in the quality of life for the people who originally inspired this work, it truly would all have been worth it.

We don't want to just end this episode with the seemingly more valuable American lives being saved. This story is not about our detainment. At this point, we are home safely; but the suffering that inspired us to risk being there is ongoing and widespread. We were made to pay a small price for bringing cameras to a place that the powerful want hidden. The people there are paying the high price of oil having been found under their feet. We are asking that you continue the work for the people left behind.

When the JTF first detained us, it was clear that they thought they could intimidate us into turning against each other, particularly the four Americans turning against Joel. This was the first in a series of disappointments for the Nigerian authorities. We all stayed together even while separated for hours of interrogation. The second disappointment was that they really could not find anything to charge us with, after days of this interrogation and examination of all

of our seized property. Lastly, because of the pressure you brought, they could not get away with illegally detaining us indefinitely to send their message.

We hope that this episode does not end with a new warning for Americans and journalists to stay away. We hope it inspires more pressure for international attention toward binding talks between the Nigerian Government, militants, oil companies, NGO's, the military and all stakeholders in the region. Nigeria can be a triumph of preventive diplomacy. It can be a place where we work to turn the corner on the old ways of blatant exploitation for resources. The triumph cannot happen in a vacuum or without witnesses. That's why we went there to film a documentary. And that's why we are so grateful that the level of support for us reflects the commitment to telling this story at this time.

What we experienced was brutal, yes. But it hasn't erased our memories of the Nigeria we had come to love before this. It is a beautiful country with many brave people trying to leave behind the old guard for good. We support that effort with all our hearts. Thank you.