



MASSIVE DEATH OF FISH ACROSS THE ATLANTIC COASTLINE OF THE NIGER DELTA

A Field Report. 05 May, 2020

Introduction:

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic has dealt the world a huge blow and has occasioned lockdowns in countries of the world including Nigeria. While the lockdown has made it difficult for people to move freely and subsist, community people and fishers along the Atlantic coastlines have witnessed an unusual phenomenon of dead fish washing ashore in Ondo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers states and Akwa Ibom states.

Concerns are being expressed by community people, as well as other stakeholders, that if this phenomenon is left unchecked, it can lead to serious destruction of the marine and fresh water systems in the region with grave health implications and livelihood loss in the affected communities and beyond.

Even though the immediate and remote cause(s) are unknown, community folks are suspecting the incident to have its source from oil industry industry-related pollution. This is quite understandable following years of oil exploration and exploitation activities in the Niger Delta and associated environmental degradation leading to negative impacts on flora and fauna [including marine and freshwater environment], loss of livelihood and health complications. Fisher folks in the region have experienced such things over and over in the rivers/ creeks, seas and oceans in the course of their fishing expeditions and, they often share experiences with fellow fisher folks and interested members of the public and the media.

This report calls on relevant public agencies like National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency [NOSDRA], NIMASA, the Ministries of Environment in the states and the National Environmental Standards and Regulatory Enforcement Agency (NESREA) to fast-track transparent and all-inclusive investigations to uncover the cause of the massive deaths recorded in the area.

Where it all Started!

The news of dead fish washing ashore first broke on 20th February, 2020 when community people from Ogbulagha Kingdom in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State reported massive death of fish, floating and littering their shores. The news was carried by different media outlets

under the headlines: “How SPDC spreads Hazardous Chemicals in Sokebolou/Yokiri Waterways, Killing Aquatic lives”¹; “Delta: Dangers as SPDC spread hazardous chemicals in Sokebolou/Yokiri Waterways”²; “SPDC toxic substance in Ogulagha Kingdom, other areas might cause cancer, expert warns”³; “SPDC Hazardous Chemical: Sekobolou Youths Send Warning Message to SPDC...”⁴; “SPDC Chemicals: Forcados registers case, says fishes are dying uncontrollably”⁵; “SPDC’s Pollution of waterways: CEPEJ calls on Federal and Delta State Government to rescue affected communities, threatens to sue SPDC over continuous pollution of Niger Delta Environment.”⁶

The Spread to Bayelsa State

With community people alleging that the dead fish incident was most likely a result of pollutants from an oil and gas facility, it becomes easy to link the same experience of dead fish species in the coastline of Bayelsa State to the Ogulagha experience in Delta State.

This linkage is supported by a report of the Environmental Rights Action/ Friends of the Earth Nigeria [ERA/FoEN] titled: “How SPDC’s Toxic Chemicals Uptake Eliminate Fishes in Bayelsa, Delta” and published in a local tabloid, Izon Link.⁷ This view was strengthened by the written statement by Surveyor Furoebi F.S. Akene titled “Environmental Genocide in the Niger Delta by the Multinational Oil Companies: A Call for Concern.” Surveyor Akene is the Chairman, Board of trustees of the Centre for Environmental Preservation and Development –CEPAD and a fellow of the Nigerian Environmental Society.

Surveyor Akene observed that “*While the whole world is engulfed in the coronavirus pandemic, the people of the coastline of the Atlantic Ocean in Bayelsa and Delta States of Nigeria are now faced with fear of a possible outbreak of Cholera, other waterborne and airborne diseases*” and that “*urgent steps should be taken to arrest the situation*”. He accused SPDC of introducing chemicals into their water thus causing damage to the aquatic/marine life to the extent that dead

¹. <https://coastaltimes.news.blog/2020/02/20/how-spdc-spreads-hazardous-chemicals-in-sokebolou-yokiri-waterways-killing-aquatic-lives-coastal-times/>

². <https://liberatorng.com/delta-danger-as-spdc-spreads-hazardous-chemicals-in-sokebolou-yokiri-waterways-the-liberator/>

³. <https://liberatorng.com/spdc-toxic-substance-in-ogulagha-kingdom-other-areas-might-cause-cancer-expert-warns-the-liberator/>

⁴. https://coastaltimes.news.blog/2020/02/26/spdc-hazardous-chemical-sokebolou-youths-sends-a-warning-message-to-spdc--urging-them-to-immediately-cleanup-the-waterways-else-face-a-reaction-from-the-youths_coastal-times/

⁵. <https://liberatorng.com/spdc-chemicals-forcados-registers-case-says-fishes-are-dying-uncontrollably-the-liberator/>

⁶. https://coastaltimes.news.blog/2020/02/24/spdcs-pollution-of-waterways-cepej-calls-on-federal-and-delta-state-government-to-rescue-affected-communities-threatens-to-sue-spdc-over-continuous-pollution-of-niger-delta-environment_coastal/

⁷ Izon Link, Thursday 2 - Thursday 9 April, 2020, page 5

fish started washing to the shoreline of the Atlantic Ocean and through the estuaries to the swamps of the hinterland. The areas worst hit according to him, are all the communities in Ogulagha clan, Gbaranmatu clan, Odimodi clan, etc. in Delta State and Agge, Ezetu1, Ezetu2, Furopa, Koluama1, Koluama2, Akassa clan, Sangana, etc in Bayelsa State” This claim was also supported by Adi Noel, an industry expert who said during an interview with Vanguard that the incident could have been triggered by the use of dispersants to cleanup operational spills⁸.

From available documentation, the incident which was experienced around the 2nd and 3rd week in February, 2020 in Delta State also came to the notice of coastline community folks in Bayelsa State around the 1st and 2nd week of March, 2020. On the 30th of March, a community person, Chief [Hon] Percy I. Jerrywemi-kuomain of Okpoama Kingdom noted that *“For the past two weeks, there has been a strange phenomenon that has been experienced. It is about dead fishes being washed ashore on the Okpoama beach. Right now no one knows the cause of the multiple deaths of fishes and again, it’s almost just one type of fish, the Onah or what we call in local palace Broke Marriage.”* Okpoama is in Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

The executive secretary of Akassa Development Foundation [ADF] noted that *“Akassa communities are amongst several communities hit by the impact of dead fishes being washed ashore since mid-March, 2020. The ADF had since then, worked with community groups especially fisher folks to identify possible causes of the dead fishes and the source, to enable Akassa communities take the right steps in engaging relevant government agencies.”*

Similarly, the CDC Chairman of Odioama community lamented, *“We are witnessing more fishes washed ashore daily. The situation is very worrisome. The worst of it is that some persons are consuming and even selling the dead fishes picked along the shore for consumption and this may pose health hazards for our people. The situation is the same at Okpoama, Diema, Oyakama, Akabeleuama, and Ibidi communities. I have personally witnessed this.”* Odioama is a coastal community along the Atlantic coastline between Bayelsa and Rivers States. And, if the people of Odioama experienced dead fish being washed ashore in large numbers, it is not a surprise that communities in Rivers State, especially Bonny, had same experience in their environment.

Meanwhile, a forum of Community Development Committees [CDC] chairmen of Chevron host communities have appealed to the Federal Government and Bayelsa State Government to check the impact of suspected toxic pollution across the Atlantic coastline in Bayelsa State.⁹

Spread to other States of the Niger Delta

⁸. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/03/bayelsa-coastline-residents-report-dead-fishes-as-expert-seeks-investigation/>

⁹. <https://globalpatriotnews.com/dead-fishes-on-sore-chevron-host-communities-differ-on-cause-of-scary-sightings-off-bayelsa-coast/>

According to one Bonny youth, *“I am in Bonny, and I am a witness to what he’s saying. As at last week people in Bonny, especially the Andoni settlers in Bonny picked plenty of it and dried it to PH and sell it.”*

A team of youths in Bonny carried out an investigation on 15th and 16th April, 2020 and thereafter issued a report titled “Findings of preliminary investigation into the incidence of dead fishes on Bonny waterways.”¹⁰ Their widely circulated report indicated that only one particular kind of fish popularly known as Broke Marriage and called Onah in Ibani dialect was affected by the incident and that the fish were seen lying dead along the shoreline.

HOMEF visited Finima fishing settlement in Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State to ascertain the impact on the environment and the community people. The people reported that the dead fish littered the shoreline all the way from Light House to Ifoko on the boundary between Bonny and Andoni Local Government Areas of Rivers State.

The community persons interviewed disclosed that the incident impacted their health and their livelihood as they could not sell the dead fish and the smell of the dead fish seems to scare away the live ones. According to a fisher, Helen Brown, sale of fish was affected as people became suspicious of fish sold in the area.

According to a community leader and secretary of the Waralapo Council of Finima, some community persons dried the dead fish for consumption. It was said that efforts have been made to sensitize the people and prevent them from consuming or selling that species of fish but people are still picking it up. [see full video report on the Bonny experience here: <https://youtu.be/2yldB1Wldm0>]

The leader of the FishNet Alliance in Akwa Ibom state, Rev Sam Ayadi, in a telephone interview reported that dead fish was sighted littering the popular Ibeno waterfront on Friday 17th April, 2020. Members of the Alliance were advised not to eat or sell the dead fish as the cause of death was yet to be ascertained.

In a related development, the Ikot Abasi LGA chapter chairman of Artisanal Fishermen Association of Nigeria (ARFAN), Hon. Godwin King also reported the incident. He stated that the littering of dead fish along the shorelines of fishing communities in Akwa Ibom State was alarming. According to him, *“since Monday 13th April 2020, in Ikot Abasi LGA, Utaewa - water way, Okopedi Ete, Jaja - creek, Urua - Essien Etuk, Opobo town, Queen's town, down - below, all of the above mentioned coast-lines were littered with dead fishes (broke - marriage, others). It was the same thing also at Eastern Obolo neighborhood. The popular opinions & observations are that it is the effect of a pollution caused by multinational operators offshore and NOSDRA is yet to ascertain what happened from its joint investigation visit to the affected areas.”*

¹⁰. https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2704499306463365&id=1632855120294461

Reactions by Stakeholders

Stakeholders have continued to express worries over the incidence, noting that there could be a major disease outbreak, ecosystem damage and livelihood loss. In a media interview, Nnimmo Bassey, the Director of Health of Mother Earth Foundation, expressed serious concerns, stating that when our coastlines being littered with dead fish was indicative of some serious ecological harm and could have serious public health impacts if the dead fish are consumed. *“The dead fish are smoking guns indicative of a serious crime”*¹¹ he said. The pandemic should not deter the relevant institutions from getting to the root of the matter: *“By now NOSDRA should have let the public know what exactly the cause of the incident is, especially since there are oil platforms not too far from the coasts. This matter should not be swept under the carpet because we are focusing attention on the coronavirus pandemic.”*

On Saturday 18th April, 2020 the Akassa Development Foundation [ADF] went with NOSDRA to Akassa shoreline for an on-the-spot assessment on the environment of some affected communities in Akassa clan. The Agency released a press statement on 21 April 2020 stating that samples of water, sediments and the dead fish had been taken for analysis.

The Nigerian Maritime Administration and Safety Agency (NIMASA) also announced that it had launched a scientific inquiry to identify the cause of dead fish washed ashore along the Niger Delta coastline states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, and Rivers, and other places within the region.¹² According to Director-General of NIMASA, Dr. Bashir Jamoh, *“We are working with relevant scientific experts to isolate the cause of the abnormal issue of dead fish along the Niger Delta coastline. We want to identify the cause and establish what can be done to alleviate the adverse effect of this occurrence on the people and the marine environment in the affected areas.”*

As different stakeholders continued to register their shock over the washing ashore of dead fish in the Niger Delta, Mr Furoebi Akene, attributed the incident to the discharge of toxic chemicals from Shell’s operations at Forcados oil export terminal and urged governments at the affected areas to wake-up to their responsibilities in the protection of the environment and the service to the people. He also called on NOSDRA to do the right thing and ensure that the result of the tests – when ready, reflects reality.¹³ *“It has also become a common knowledge that, the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited SPDC discharged sludge mixed with chemicals into the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The discharge through one of their waste disposals pipes from the Forcados Terminal around Ogulagha. In the same vein, we are urging the Governments of the affected states of Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Ondo and their respective National*

¹¹. <https://tribuneonlineng.com/environmentalist-seeks-probe-into-cause-of-dead-fishes-on-bayelsa-shoreline/>

¹² <https://www.thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2020/04/27/nimasa-probes-cause-of-dead-fish-along-niger-delta-coastline/>

¹³. <https://nigerdeltaherald.com/environmentalist-links-dead-fishes-to-toxic-chemicals-from-shell-urges-nosdra-to-sit-up/>

Assembly members and State Assembly members to rise up to their responsibilities to pursue this matter to its logical conclusion for the lives of their citizens,” Akene said.

While Shell is being accused in Delta State, some persons in communities where Chevron operates are alleging that Chevron is responsible and they have even threatened shutting down the company's operations.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶

Conclusion

Coastal communities in the Niger Delta depend on fishing and farming for their livelihoods. Massive number of dead fish washing ashore should send a message to us that something serious has happened to the water bodies. Apart from environmental and livelihood issues, the poison or whatever killed the fish can find their way into our food chain and cause further harm.

Unless a well-coordinated official investigation is carried out to ascertain the immediate and remote cause of death of the identified species of fish, allegations made without supporting evidence would make the identification of the cause difficult and thereby blocking possibilities of taking steps to prevent reoccurrence.

We demand that:

1. Government must see this incident as a major ecological disaster and ensure that the cause of the pollution is quickly detected and the public is duly alerted.
2. There should be adequate sensitization to raise the awareness of people especially in the coastal communities to ensure that the dead fish are not consumed or sold in view of possible health implications
3. The true cause of the incidence should not be concealed but be revealed, addressed and let the perpetrators be duly held liable for the ecological crime..
4. Government should urgently carry out an health audit in affected coastline communities to ensure their health status and offer treatment as necessary.

[5] Fishers and community folks should promptly report future occurrence of similar incidents to relevant authorities and stakeholders.

Signed:

FishNet Alliance

¹⁴. <http://www.thetidenewsonline.com/2020/04/14/chevron-host-communities-disagree-on-strange-dead-fishes-on-bayelsa-coastlines/>

¹⁵. <https://tell.ng/bayelsa-communities-threaten-to-shut-chevron-platform-over-oil-spill/>

¹⁶. <https://theeagleonline.com.ng/chevron-host-communities-differ-on-cause-of-massive-death-of-fishes-off-bayelsa-coast/>

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