

Nigeria's gas profits 'up in smoke'

Contributed by Andrew Walker
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Critical Comment:

Flaring natural gas is indeed as bad as this news story suggests, but nothing was said about the global-warming potential. It's a criminal act that all of us modern consumers are guilty of. Shell is identified as the major culprit, and many of us remember that because of activist Ken Saro-Wiwa's campaigns for his fellow Nigerians against Shell's pollution, he was executed. I met his brother Owen, another activist, who agreed that it's not very helpful to boycott Shell when we need to boycott petroleum across the board. Read this and weep or wonder. -- Jan Lundberg, editor

The latest deadline set by the Nigerian government to stop flaring natural gas from oil wells in the Niger Delta has passed without stopping the flames, which campaigners say are poisoning local people.

"Sometimes you can't tell whether it's the dawn breaking or the flame," says activist Vivian Bellonwu, the frustration clear in her voice, after seeing nothing change despite the 1 January target.

"It's a history of shifting goal posts, missing deadline after deadline".

Everyone agrees gas flaring wastes billions of dollars in useful gas.

Campaigners say it causes huge environmental damage and according to doctors, it is responsible for causing chronic health problems among people who live in the Delta.

But the government and the oil companies are blaming each other.

"It's all insincerity from the government and the companies -they're destroying lives and livelihoods," says Mrs Bellonwu.

Blighted

Nigeria flares the second largest volume of gas of any producer, behind Russia.

Communities who live near Nigeria's more than 1,000 onshore well heads are blighted by gas plumes that rise from the ground, spreading toxic smoke and chemicals over their farms.

Social Action, the organisation Mrs Bellonwu works for, has been representing the communities who live near the many gas flares that light up the watery marshland and mangrove swamps of the Delta.

"When you approach a gas flare, the first thing you notice is the heat, the villages around the flares are all very hot."

The flames also light up the sky 24 hours a day, and the noise that comes from them is a continuous roar like a jet aircraft taking off.

She says doctors have reported higher rates of cancer, children with asthma and a suggestion the burning gasses may be making residents infertile.

"The smoke in some places is overpowering. It can't be good."

Royal Dutch Shell, the largest operator of onshore wells, has not commented on the claims that gas flaring affects the health of local residents.

Not profitable

Nigeria's onshore oil production started in the 1950s.

As the oil comes up through the well head, it emerges with little bubbles of gas.

But until the 1980s with no way to store or transport it, there was little market for natural gas produced in Nigeria.

The operating oil companies simply burned it off.

Since then the price of gas has risen, transportation techniques have developed and drilling technology has improved allowing more oil, and consequently more gas, to be drawn through a single well.

Now experts believe Nigeria is burning billions of dollars of gas from its aging wells, letting potential profits go up in smoke.

Even more ironically, campaigners say, the biggest need for that gas is in Nigeria.

Nigeria is in the grip of a power generation crisis and the gas that is being burned could go a long way towards providing the electricity the country desperately needs in order to develop its economy.

Blame game

The government and the oil companies agree they want to end gas flaring.

Shell says it has reduced the amount of gas flared by more than 30% since 2000.

Nigeria's gas profits 'up in smoke', by Andrew Walker, BBC News, Nigeria

www.oilwatch.org

Nigeria - Stakeholders tackle FG on environment at Summit, by Ugochukwu Chimezi, Dec. 15, 2008

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