

Editorial

The Niger Delta

For nearly three decades, conflicts surrounding environmental degradation, human security, and international development have dominated news about the Niger Delta on the Atlantic Ocean¹. But the interaction between trade and politics in the region has a long historical record, and has always fascinated popular writers and serious scholars. In the preface to his classic work in 1956, Onwuka Dike wrote about the Niger Delta region²:

“This region became from the sixteenth century the main centre of the African trade with Europeans in the Gulf of Guinea. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Delta was one of the most important, if not the leading, slave mart in West Africa. In the first thirty years of the nineteenth century when the trade in palm oil had begun to displace the trade in men it exported more oil than the rest of West Africa put together. When in 1830 the Landers proved that the Delta was the mouth of the River Niger, a succession of British commercial expeditions sought to penetrate the hinterland through the Niger waterway. In the nineteenth century, therefore, this river, like the more famous Congo, became one of the highways of imperialism in Africa. The Royal Niger Company--the chief instrument by which Britain won her Nigerian empire--based its activities in the Delta and the Niger valley. British ascendancy in this important trading area justified her claim to supremacy in the Niger territories during the Berlin West African Conference of 1885.”

Clearly, petroleum mining is only the latest in a long series of societal incendiaries that have fueled international conflict and humanitarian disasters in this volatile region. This month witnesses especially troubling developments in the nexus of human rights and environmental justice in the Niger Delta. Activists have sued Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company in a New York court for their alleged role in the death sentence meted out against Mr. Ken Saro Wiwa in 1995³. And this month, the largest military activity in several years was launched by the government against a variety of militia's professing to fight for the rights of indigenous peoples. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is perhaps the best known of these militias. But it is unclear how many groups are holding foreign hostages or how many indigenes have suffered casualties. We do know that increasingly, the national army also suffers casualties as their weapons are matched in sophistication by weapons easily purchased through the illicit – and complicit – international weapons market. The human tragedy is also unfortunately a major distraction from the environmental impacts of the petroleum industry, not only in the mining stage at the Delta, but also throughout society as cities are choked with urban air pollutants associated with petrochemical fuels and indoor air quality in both urban and rural regions suffer from the use of kerosene lamps because of unreliable supply of electricity. Meanwhile, perpetual forest fires contribute to regional smoke and a waste of natural resources for the agriculture and energy sectors (Figure 1). The modest progress that was being made to control the flaring of natural gas in the Niger Delta is probably stalled as a result of the conflict (Figure 2). Globally, natural gas flares associated with petroleum mining contribute to unnecessary carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Without controlling this major source, Nigeria will only be paying lip service to the international Climate Change Protocols talking about Clean Development Mechanism⁴. Clearly, the entire energy sector needs to be reviewed and overhauled, and it will be a co-benefit of the process if de-emphasizing petroleum in the national economy contributes to the solution of the Niger Delta Debacle.

¹ Odeyemi, O., and O.A. Ogunseitan. 1985. Petroleum Oil Industry and its Pollution Potential in Nigeria. *Oil and Petroleum Pollution* 2:223-229.

² K. Onwuka Dike. 1956. Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830 – 1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 250 pages.

³ British Broadcasting Corporation News. Nigeria Oil Executions Case Reaches US. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8067218.stm> (Accessed on 26 May 2009).

⁴ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). <http://cdm.unfccc.int/index.html> (Accessed on 25 May 2009).

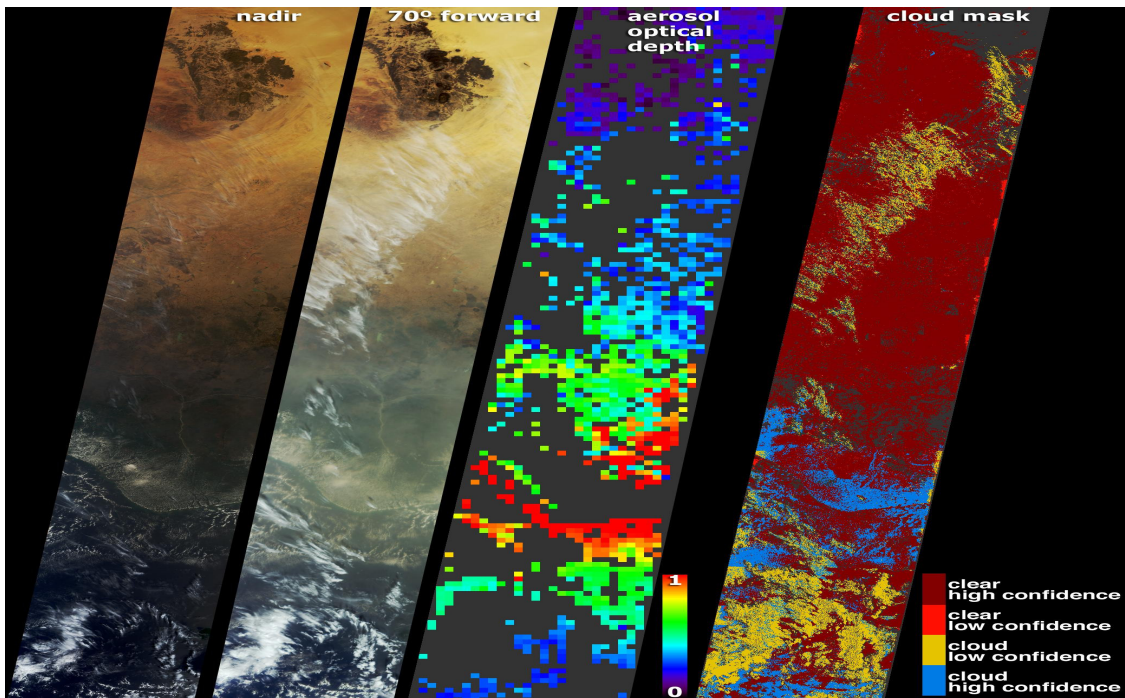


Figure 1. Images captured and processed by NASA's Multi-angle Imaging SpectroRadiometer showing smoke from fires burning throughout Nigeria and north central. The left panel shows natural-color views extending from Air Mountains in the north to the Niger Delta in the south. Several smoke plumes are from fires burning within the image area. <http://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/catalog/PIA03897>.

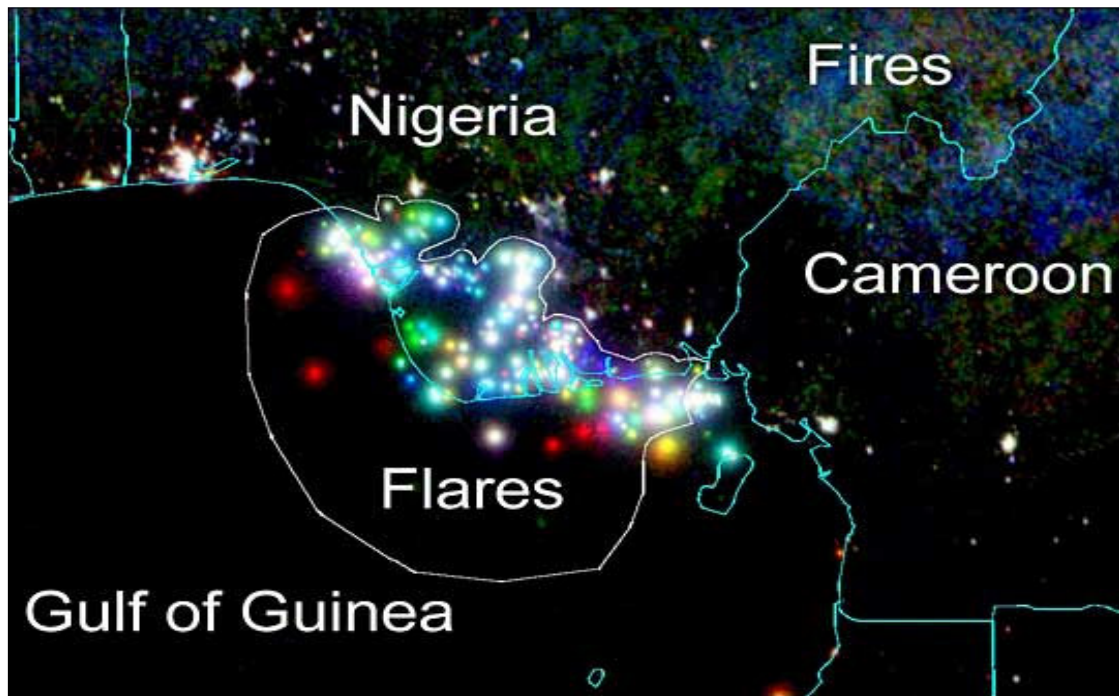


Figure 2. Permanent night light sources as documented by United States Air Force Defense Meteorological Program shows flaring trouble in the Niger Delta region. Data from 1995 are represented in blue, 2000 in green and 2006 in red. The gas flares associated with petroleum industry are shown in white (<http://www.ngdc.noaa.gov/dmsp/>).