The Insensitivity of Shell (II)

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The federal government must be aware of the effort of Shell to cover up its atrocious act in Ogoniland by hastily awarding contracts to pour sand over the degraded soil in Ogoniland

Nigeria has become a country of the unimaginable where epochal events happen with dizzying speed. Such events almost succeeded in shoving aside the recent Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC’s, atrocious act in Ogoniland from public discourse. The notorious events which all happened in August in the political, security and judicial landscapes of the country left one’s mouth agape just like SPDC’s bid to cover up its devastation of Ogoniland did. It all started with the discordant tune emanating from the judiciary resulting from the unfortunate rancour between Justices Aloysius Katsina-Alu and Ayo Salami, the retired chief justice of Nigeria and the suspended President of the Court of Appeal, respectively. These events were followed by the damning United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP, report indicting Shell of degrading Ogoniland and then came the condemnable suicide bomb blast of August 26, at the UN office in Abuja. That blast killed 23 and injured many people. Prior to the bomb blast, the nation was reeling from the federal government’s brazen swear-in of Dalhatu Adamu, as the acting president of the Court of Appeal. Amidst criticisms, the federal government defended its action with a spin that it acted to fill the vacuum created by the contrived suspension of Salami by the National Judicial Council. The federal government’s spin dovetailed into the tailspin in Libya when it recognised the National Transition Council controlled by the rebel group in Libya. This action was equally criticised by Gwede Mantashe, secretary-general of the African National Congress, South Africa. Moreover, South Africa described federal government’s action as hasty - a misspoken speech that elicited an equally robust reaction from Reuben Abati, President Jonathan’s spokesman. Abati was right to state that the government had the right to take a position on international issues in line with Nigeria’s foreign policy goals. “Nigeria’s position is very clear, consistent and principled,” adding: “Nigeria respects the wishes of the people of Libya. Nigeria has advised the transitional council to ensure that the interests of the people are defended and that multiple-party democracy is returned as quickly as possible and that reconciliation and reconstruction should be the objectives of the new adminis-tration.” This prompt recognition of NTC in Libya is okay as far as the defence of the rights of the voiceless and silent majority in Libya is concerned. This is also where I want to draw a parallel. Abati, albeit the federal government should also focus attention on the environmental degradation of Ogoni land which will pretty much translate into disaster soon. The situation is also crying for swift and principled action. The federal government, as a matter of urgency, must stop equivocating and take a principled stand on the UNEP report which indicted Shell of devastating Ogoniland. The federal government must be aware of the effort of Shell to cover up its atrocious act in Ogoniland by hastily awarding contracts to pour sand over the degraded soil in Ogoniland. This is why the federal government, as a matter of principle, must take immediate action to defend the interest of Nigerians albeit the helpless and endangered people of Ogoniland, who in years to come, will be dying in hundreds as a result of drinking hydrocarbon-polluted water because they have no other alternative. Why is the federal government not seizing the momentum provided by the UNEP report to serve notice on Shell that it must take immediate remedial action to ameliorate the plight and health problems of the Ogoni people as a result of SPDC’s operations? Why is the federal government setting up a committee which every right thinking citizen of this country knows that it is all bunkum? Government must be reminded that while it is okay to cater for the interest of the Libyan people, charity must begin at home. President Goodluck Jonathan must not turn a blind eye to a national emergency which the Ogoni case has become in line with Section 14 of the Constitution which says that the primary purpose of government is to ensure the welfare and security of the people. There is no gain-saying that the Ogoni people are endangered people and must be protected pronto. The voices of the Ogoni 13 and Ken Saro-Wiwa who died fighting to protect the environment in Ogoni land and which the UNEP report has vindicated cry out from the wilderness of the dead demanding that the federal government should act fast. It does not need the setting up of an ad hoc committee to study UNEP report before taking a positive action. Afterall, was there any UNEP report before the British Petroleum took immediate action to remedy the oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico? Was there any report before Royal Dutch Shell in August quickly plugged the leaks and contained the oil spill in the North Sea, Aberdeen in Scotland, UK? Even in the most recent North Sea Oil spill, the Royal Dutch Shell moved to act before environmentalist from Friends of the Earth and Green Peace descended on it. The company had to plug the leaks within 48 hours and even at that, Shell was accused of being economical with the truth because it did not give out information that there was a leak 48 hours after it occurred during which 1,300 barrels of oil were reported to have been emptied into the North Sea. Whereas the leaders of the Western World reacted spontaneously to environmental issues affecting their citizens with out waiting for UNEP report or setting up a committee to study any report, here in Nigeria, President Jonathan is indulging in an unnecessary time wasting. Rather than seize the momentum which the UNEP report provided, Jonathan is dancing to the tune of the multinational company when three weeks ago, in Abuja, he constituted a special committee to undertake a holistic review of the UNEP report on oil pollution in Ogoniland. The committee is to make recommendations to the federal government on immediate and long term remedial actions. Interestingly, most Nigerians who reacted to the first article I wrote on “The Insensitivity of Shell,” have no confidence in the committee, chaired by Diezani Alison-Madueke, minister of petroleum resources. The committee was given two weeks to submit its report. The two weeks have passed and nothing is being said thus fuelling the suspicion that the committee will finally kill the report. But all hope is not lost. The members of the committee are supposedly people with proven integrity and hopefully will not disappoint Nigerians and the suffering Ogoni people in particular. They include Hadiza Ibrahim Mailafiya, minister of environment and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala,

minister of finance and co-ordinating minister for the economy. Contrary to reservations some Nigerians have on the chairman of the committee, I believe that Alison-Madueke is well positioned to extract the proverbial pound of flesh from the Merchant of Venice, in this case Shell. The idea that she will represent the country well is borne out of the fact that she is a former-executive director of SPDC. This very reason for which people distrust her, must be her source of strength because she knows Shell inside out and SPDC cannot pretend that it will not be able to pay the cost of remediation. Again, she has demonstrated that she is capable of weathering any storm through the proactive measures that checked the twin evils of fuel and kerosene scarcity in the country. She has contained the myriads of variables both human and otherwise that caused the problem since she became the minister of petroleum resources barely a year ago. This is in addition to the fact that she and the President are from the Niger Delta. They must have seen the devastation of the area by multinational oil companies any time they visit home. Also, the presence of Okonjo-Iweala gives hope because she too knows the international standards used in dealing with a serious case of oil spills and devastation of the environment such as the case in Ogoniland. The three women in that committee must always remember the enormous responsibility fate has placed on them to protect the precarious state of their fellow women in Ogoni. The women are drinking hydrocarbon polluted water because they have no choice and will soon be dying of cancerous diseases as vividly stated in the UNEP report they have been asked to review. I have no doubt that the committee along with Shell officials will be drinking fancy bottled water and eating a la carte meals prepared with uncontaminated fishes during the committee’s meetings but they must spare a thought for the women and men who cannot fish or farm anymore because the fishes in the rivers have all died and farmlands ravaged due to oil spills from SPDC’s exploitation and exploratory activities in Ogoni. To be continued SMS: 08052528603