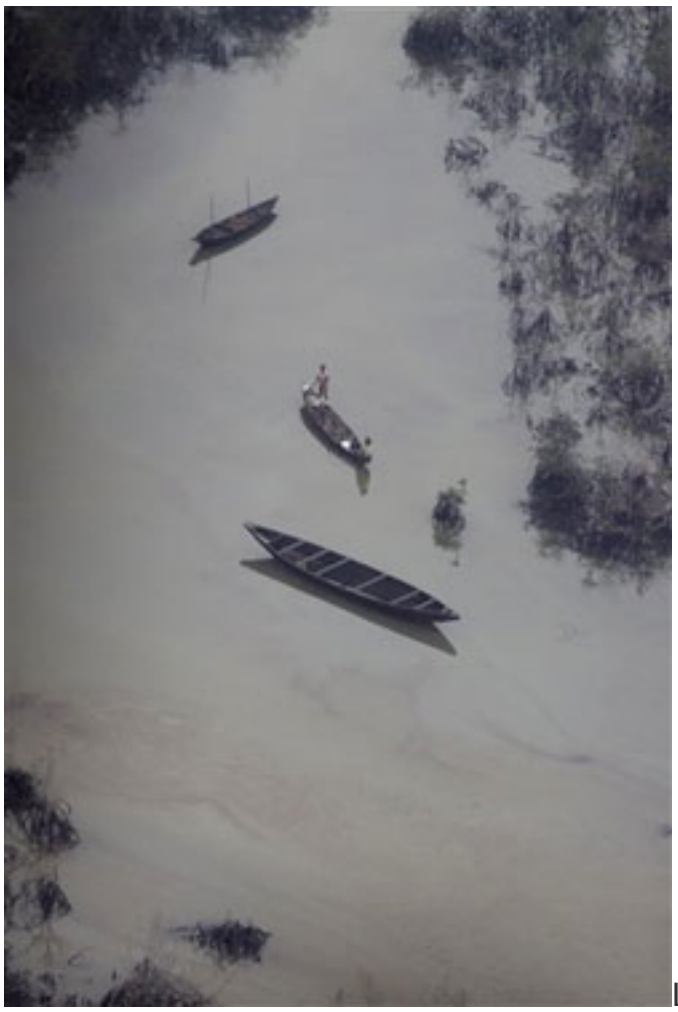
UN: Widespread Oil Damage Found in Nigeria Delta

JON GAMBRELL,Associated Press



LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — A region of Nigeria's oil-rich southern delta suffers widespread ecological damage as spilled oil seeps into its drinking water, destroys plants and remains in the ground for decades at a time, said a United Nations report released Thursday.

The U.N. report focused on the Ogoniland area of Nigeria's Niger Delta, a region of swamps, mangroves and creeks almost the size of South Carolina or Portugal. Though production in the region stopped in 1993, pipelines and flowstations operated by a subsidiary of Royal Dutch Shell PLC and the state-run Nigerian National Petroleum Corp. still run through villages and fields.

Oil spills from those sites, caused by operator errors and vandalism, have thoroughly damaged lands, the U.N. found. In one case, the U.N. found a village where drinking water was polluted with benzene 900 times more than the international limit. The U.N. also found one area where an oil spill 40 years ago hadn't been cleaned.

"The Ogoni people live with this pollution every minute of every day, 365 days a year," the report said. "Since average life expectancy in Nigeria is less than 50 years, it is a fair assumption that most members of the current Ogoniland community have lived with chronic oil pollution throughout their lives."

The report also said that children born in Ogoniland are affected by the oil pollution daily, "as the odor of hydrocarbons pervades the air day in, day out."

Some environmentalists say as much as 550 million gallons of oil have poured into

the Niger River Delta during 50 years of production — at a rate roughly comparable to one Exxon Valdez disaster per year.

Nigeria, an OPEC member, is one of the top crude oil suppliers to the U.S.

Shell funded the U.N. investigation, leading to criticism by some environmentalists that the report wouldn't take on the oil giant many demonize in the region. The report said damage can be caused by failing oil pipelines, as well as by thieves who tap into the lines to steal crude oil — a worsening problem in Ogoniland.

"It was not within (the U.N.'s) scope to identify the cause of the individual spills, nor is it scientifically possible to detect the original cause of spills after an unknown time period," the report said.

The U.N. said it will take as much as 30 years to clean the lands of oil and suggested setting up an initial $1 billion trust fund for the cleanup. The world body suggested the oil industry and the government should put up those funds.

Online:

U.N. report: http://www.unep.org/nigeria *[1]*

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Jon Gambrell can be reached at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP *[2]*

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