

NIGERIA: PIPELINE EXPLOSIONS

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The Disaster

Over the period from 10 to 23 July 2000, three major pipeline explosions occurred in the Delta Region of Nigeria. Six villages were affected in each of the two explosions in Okpe and Warri South Local Government areas (LGAs) while one village was affected in the Ethiope-West LGA. Over 230 people were killed and 30 reported missing in the Okpe, 40 killed in Warri South LGA, and 15 people in Ethiope-West LGA.

It appears that oil is illegally diverted to barges and tankers in an organised way. The pipelines fractured in the process are not being resealed or repaired leaving heavy and uncontrolled seepage into the farmland areas close to villages. This contaminated and environmentally damaged area then becomes highly flammable and extremely vulnerable to ignition from fire in the vicinity. Villagers also take their opportunity to collect petrol in buckets from the vandalised pipeline increasing the risk of ignition and explosion. The villagers affected are reluctant to disclose casualties due to fear of prosecution for illegally tapping fuel. Another explosion occurred on 30 July bringing the total number of explosions this year to 7.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

Under the direction of the National Emergencies Officer, a combined Emergency Red Cross Team made up of 35 volunteers from the Edo and Delta State Branches carried out a search and rescue operation, provided on-the-spot first aid and evacuated 22 injured persons by Red Cross ambulance to Benin Teaching Hospital. The team provided psychological support to the traumatised people by their very presence and activity. They also negotiated with hospital authorities to provide free treatment as provided for by the Government edict.

The Emergency Team is also liaising with and providing support to the combined Health Team made up of doctors and medics from the Federal Ministry of Health, UNICEF and WHO. The Health Team is operating under the Red Cross emblem.

The Red Cross worked closely with villagers and LGA officials to build confidence and to overcome fears of prosecution. Without the developed trust and the existing community respect for the Red Cross neutrality it would not have been possible for the Emergency Red Cross Team or others who wished to help to gain access to casualties or those affected.

The Emergency Red Cross Team purchased food rations of rice, beans and cooking oil locally and distributed them to 384 of the most affected families from Oviri Court, Okugbogbo and Egborode villages. Edo and Delta State Branches provided the volunteers with food and transport from their own resources. Due to financial and organisational constraints it was not possible to extend the food operation to all those most affected in the pipeline explosions. The search and rescue operation has now ceased despite the continuing need for assistance.

Needs

The area affected by the explosions is characterised by extreme poverty. The crops of cassava, yam and palm as well as fishing canoes and nets on which the communities rely have been destroyed in the fire. It is clear that there is an urgent need for further short-term food relief as Government assistance is now unlikely. Costs of the operation to date have been covered from the Federation's Disaster Preparedness and Relief programme in Nigeria and CHF 6,800 are required to reimburse these costs. Additional CHF 5,000 are needed to provide food relief to the most affected from other explosions.

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