

Court case reopens author-activist's death

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York, which brought the case. Among the allegations are that Shell paid and armed a security force that killed protesters and that the company bribed witnesses to finger Saro-Wiwa with murder.

"I can assure you that no one in Shell wanted Ken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow accused executed by the Nigerian government," said Alan Detheridge, a Shell vice president based in London.

Detheridge described the suit's allegations against the oil conglomerate as "entirely without substance."

Looking at multinationals

The case arises at a time of heightened awareness about the behavior of global corporations in Third World countries. Saro-Wiwa's protest movement is often hailed as an inspiration for the antiglobalization movement.

The case is a test of the reach of US courts. No American jurisdiction has awarded damages for a corporation's participation in human rights abuses overseas.

The suit is also a mission for Saro-Wiwa's family, notably his son, Ken Wiwa, a 32-year-old author, and his brother, Owens Saro-Wiwa, a 44-year-old doctor, who live in Toronto. They want to clear Saro-Wiwa's name, learn the truth, and allow the family and their nation, now a struggling democracy, to move forward.

"What we want to know, as do a lot of people in Nigeria, is just what was Shell's role?" asked Ken Wiwa, his eyes flashing behind black-framed glasses. "We need to know. As Desmond Tutu says, there can be no future without forgiveness."

Poverty in an oil-rich land

Along Nigeria's coast stretches one of the world's largest wetlands, a mangrove-studded swampland rich in fish and wildlife, trees and lush flowers, and, most of all, oil.

From this delta comes nearly all of Nigeria's oil. So rich are the oil fields that they account for 90 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

Although plagued by corruption, poverty, and religious and ethnic conflict, Nigeria is considered the country with the greatest economic promise in sub-Saharan Africa. Oil has made some Nigerians as rich as kings. But those who live in the oil-rich swampland have remained as poor as beggars. Among these are the Ogoni, Ken Saro-Wiwa's people.

Thousands of miles of oil pipelines weave through the Ogonis' mud-hut villages and crisscross their lands. But electricity is scarce, paved roads few, and there is a shortage of schools and health clinics. Gas escaping from oil facilities chokes the air. Frequent oil spills have tainted the land and water, killing crops and animals, hurting the livelihood of farmers.

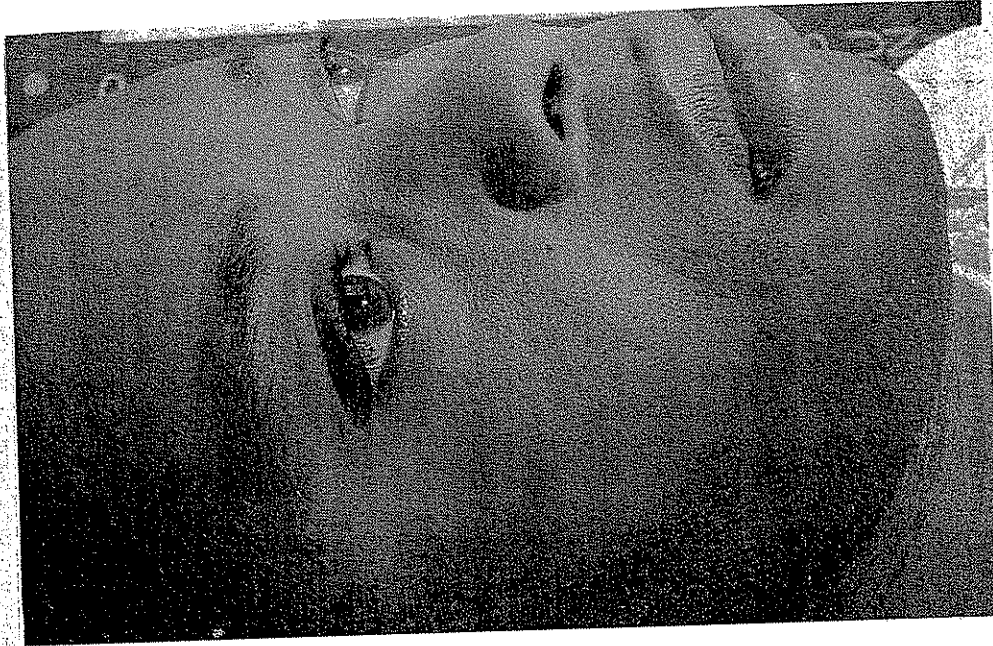
"I saw the impact of environmental problems on people," said Owens Saro-Wiwa, recalling his patients. "Asthmatic attacks, bronchitis, conjunctivitis, skin diseases."

By 1990, the Ogoni people's anger had coalesced into a protest movement. Ken Saro-Wiwa was the galvanizing force behind it.

Friends and relatives recall the author, columnist, and critic as charming and erudite, a man given to quoting Shakespeare but who also penned the country's most popular television sitcom, "Basi and Company," which pokes fun at Nigerians' endless schemes to get ahead. His critics, including some among the Ogoni, saw him as ambitious and ruthless.

Straight to a cause

Whether people revered or disliked him, few disagree he was single-minded about his cause. "He was blunt and straightforward," recalls Sam Adami, a lawyer now



Ken Wiwa, son of author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.