

Son takes on Big Oil to avenge dad's death

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KEN SARO-WIWA has traveled 5,000 miles and waited 13 years to get justice for his father.

He is suing Shell Oil over the death of his dad and eight others executed 13 years ago by the Nigerian government during an infamous crackdown on opponents of Big Oil.

"My father and eight others were executed for crimes they did not commit," Saro-Wiwa told the Daily News. "They were seen as collateral damage so transnational business could continue pumping oil."

Early next year, Saro-Wiwa's lawyers will try to convince a Manhattan jury that one of the most recognized names in the global oil business — Shell — was behind their loved ones' deaths.

Three weeks ago, Saro-Wiwa's lawyers cleared a significant hurdle in their effort to force Shell to pay millions in damages when Manhattan Federal Judge Kimba Wood set a Feb. 9 trial date.

Lawyers for the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights accuse the company of conspiring to torture and murder opponents in a pattern of human rights abuses.



Ken Saro-Wiwa says murder charges that led to dad's execution were concocted.

Photo by Bryan Smith

They are suing under an arcane law that allows redress in U.S. courts if Americans are involved in crimes abroad.

"We realized we wouldn't get justice in Nigeria," Saro-Wiwa said. "That's why we're here." Shell denies the allegations in court.

At the heart of the case is whether Royal Dutch Shell conspired to silence environmental activists with the help of Nigerian security forces.

At the time, Saro-Wiwa's dad — who shared the same name as his son — and others were seeking to draw the world's attention to the Niger Delta, where they claimed Shell's mammoth oil-pumping operation was extracting huge profits by ravaging their land and polluting their air.

Among the key pieces of evidence Saro-Wiwa's lawyers hope to show jurors is a secret memo authored by the head of Nigerian security forces in the region.

"Shell operations [are] still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence," the memo reads.

Saro-Wiwa's father was hanged on Nov. 10, 1995, some 10 months after his arrest on murder charges. His family says the charges against him were concocted to quiet him and others who dared to speak up.

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