

Published in Toward Freedom,  
Vol. 46, No. 6, November, 1997,  
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# No Safe Haven

Even in refugee camps, Nigeria's indigenous  
Ogoni people face abuse and intimidation

*Based on investigations & interviews in Cotonou, Benin, June 1997.*

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**C**otonou is a city of opportunists, assassins, and spies, where anyone with half a nose can easily root out stories of rape, murder, or extortion from the chaos orchestrated by the West. A sliver of colonial nationhood stuck between the "emerging democracies" of Nigeria's General Sani Abacha and Togo's Gen Gnassingbe Eyadema, Benin is run by another tyrant-cum-democrat, Gen. Mathieu Kerekou. It is a breeding-ground for international intrigue -- where everything has its price.

At the offices of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in June, I found new arrivals from Ogoni, Nigeria, seeking asylum at one of two UNHCR camps. Ogonis began fleeing after the Nigerian junta framed and hanged writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight leaders of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) on November 10, 1995. Most of the 1200 Ogonis now in Benin fled after military retaliation for the annual January 3 celebrations of Ogoni Day. Hunted by Abacha's State Security Services (SSS), most arrive with only the clothes on their backs.

Twenty-two year old Saturday arrived on a Monday, but he and Teddy waited outside the UNHCR offices until Thursday for their asylum interviews. They lingered, squatted, and huddled through four cold nights of torrential rain and malarial mosquitoes. Such is the rainy season in Benin. Humor about Saturday's name evaporated as he testified to the nightmare of Ogoni occupation by Western oil companies and military forces. Both men described cruel and inhuman treatment, including genital torture, perpetrated daily on them and the "many Ogoni boys" incarcerated by the Rivers State Internal Security Task Force (ISTF).

In 1993, Saturday was arrested and beaten senseless. In 1994, he was regularly stripped and beaten with guns and electrical cables. He points to scars on his scalp and forearms, and to his deeply scarred thighs and shins.

"Even day for some months they bring me out and beat me," he said. Released in 1995, he was told by the notorious Major Paul Okuntinmo that he'd be shot if he participated in Ogoni activities again. Rearrested on November 10 last year (1996), he saw one man shot dead while trying to escape. Saturday decided it was time to leave. On June 14, he outsmarted his jailers, and two days later he crossed into Benin.

Teddy was arrested with three others on November 10, 1995, a year to the day after Ken Saro-Wiwa's execution. Until March 4 this year, when his father bailed him out, he was given 24 strokes of the cane almost every day. His second arrest came after an Ogoni protest against Royal/Dutch Shell in May.

"We had information that Shell wanted to come back to Ogoni," he said. "Shell was meeting with the Ogoni chiefs who are anti-MOSOP, who we call 'vultures' because they are paid by Shell. But the Ogoni say: 'No to Shell!' We don't want Shell in Ogoni and many people came out to send this message." <sup>i</sup>

The "vultures" then wrote to the Internal Security Task Force, Teddy explained, identifying those who were resisting. "They [vultures] said [ISTF] should kidnap and kill all of us." Four days after the protest, while Teddy was in hiding, ITSF operatives arrested his parents.

"I don't know where they took my mother and father," he told me.

On June 15, after five days of denied requests, the UNHCR's Representative in Benin, Guenet Guebre Christos, gave me permission to visit the Come refugee camp. But Madame Guenet, as she's known to refugees, also provided a defensive tirade on the UNHCR's problems, pressure from Nigeria's government, the ingratitude of Ogoni refugees, attempts to kidnap them, and Shell Oil's rights in Benin.

"Benin law had been admitting refugees from Nigeria and Togo, two very strong neighbors," she warned. "The Ogonis must be responsible for their movement." She added, "The Ogonis will tell you that Shell has an office right behind [UNHCR], but Benin is free country and Shell can put their offices where they like."

Shell arrived in Cotonou eight months after the UNHCR began receiving Ogonis. Clotilde da Silva Barnes, Shell's PR agent and the wife of the British High Commissioner in Cotonou, was evasive, but admitted she "had seen Madame Guenet around. You know, at parties and things." At The

Livingstone, a posh “whitey” restaurant with an “I love Shell” sticker on the cash register, bartenders recalled that da Silva Barnes and UNHCR staff, including Madame Guenet, “often came in” and “sometimes talk together.” Yet, Madame Guenet feigned ignorance about Shell, and claimed she’d “never met” da Silva Barnes.

“The Nigerian government has charged that [Ogonis] are armed young men being trained to overthrow Nigeria. Of course, they are not armed,” she admitted. “Ogonis have many complaints, but we feel our assistance is quite adequate.”

An hour later, I was flying through the countryside in a shiny Land cruiser, courtesy of UNHCR, en route to Come, where some 1200 Ogoni refugees “merely exist,” as one of them puts it, in “idle poverty and constant fear.” The UN driver was generally contemptuous; driving 70 mph he honked, swerved, and swore all the way over shattered, often crowded pavement. Such arrogance and contempt for the common man and woman is the stuff of which murder is made.

Welcoming me, the Ogonis said I was the first foreign journalist allowed into Come refugee camp since it was set up in February 1996. The agitated staff mumbled about “authorization” until the refugees drew me off. Children, too young to understand, laughed and snuck into photographs. Friends and relatives of Saro-Wiwa and the leaders of MOSOP corralled me. Stories of trauma gushed like the oil taken from their land.

During my two weeks in Cotonou, I confirmed serious and legitimate complaints about the UNHCR’s neutrality and the security of refugees from Togo and Nigeria. They have documented activities by intelligence operatives: attempted kidnappings, constant surveillance, and infiltration of refugee camps. There are also questions about UN disbursement of funds. Nigerians “screened” by the UN as Ogonis, but believed to be SSS agents, have been exposed. In the camp, unarmed Ogoni guards, posted in the absence of sufficient UNHCR security, showed me a Shell ID card found on one man they intercepted. “We are Ogonis, and we knew this man was not an Ogoni.”

All non-Ogoni “outsiders” turned over to the Beninois police were subsequently released. Such incidents are partially substantiated by UNHCR, and according to Madame Guenet, police reports are pending. Refugees call these investigations “inconclusive by design.” Ogonis see recent efforts to beef up security between Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, and Benin, members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as portents of their future. Regional media have reported promises by Benin’s ambassador to Nigeria that authorities will help drive exiled Nigerian dissidents out of Benin, and efforts by Abacha to establish “legal instruments” for investigation and extradition.

“The police of any of these states can move into another with minimum hindrance,” says Nigeria’s Inspector General of Police.

There were many Ogoni and Togolese refugee complaints about hostile and degrading treatment by local UNHCR, Red Cross, and Caritas International staff. Interviews with all parties suggest that refugee concerns have been met with hostility and intimidation. The local Beninois police have stormed Come camp in full riot gear, arresting Ogonis for alleged offenses that should have been addressed by UNHCR. During one incident, police cocked their pistols and rifles.

Refugees see a coordinated international effort to trap Nigerian and Togolese critics and

*intelligentsia* in Benin, where in time Abacha and Eyadema will get them one way or another. International capital has a propensity, of course, to work to eliminate all resistance to predatory capitalism and the devastation of free trade. Nowhere is this more evident than in Africa.<sup>ii</sup>

“Madame Guenet warned us not to ‘misbehave’ or Benin will send us back to Nigeria like the Hutus were sent back to Rwanda,” says one Ogoni. “They treat us like animals. If your [UN] protection officer wants to see you, she will see you. If she likes you, maybe you will be resettled to the US. If not, they shout at you and drive you away. Refugees have even been assaulted. And God forbid that you ask for basic supplies like sanitary napkins for Ogoni women. So we feel like sheep being readied for slaughter.” ~ **end.**

**Writer’s note, September 2003:** Ogoni and Togolese refugees continue to suffer insecurity in exile from their home countries. The governments of General Gnassingbe Eyadema and Olusegun Obasanjo continue to perpetuate gross human rights violations, with complete executive sanction by the United Nations and the international “community.” The Eyadema dictatorship is one of the most ruthless and unaccountable on the planet, and it has been for decades, perpetuating terror with total impunity.<sup>iii</sup> See Keith Harmon Snow on *The Pacification of the Tribes of the Lower Niger and the Life and Death of Ken Saro-Wiwa*.

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<sup>i</sup> See: Okonto, Ike and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil in the Niger River Delta*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> See, e.g., Madsen, Wayne. *Genocide and Covert Operations in Africa, 1993-1999*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1999.

<sup>iii</sup> Personal communications with Dr. Owen’s Wiwa, June 2003.