

# **Hazardous fish in Ogoniland**

**I**T was recently reported that a Port Harcourt-based fishing company dumped about 50 tonnes of decaying fish on the lands of the Taaba community in the Khana Local Council Area of Rivers State. Ordered by the state authorities to clean up the land, the company allegedly paid the sum of N1,000,000 to a group of community leaders who in turn contracted youths for N1,000 each, to bury the fish in a shallow grave. One of the young men has been reported dead while some others have fallen ill from carrying out this dangerous assignment. From available reports, the Rivers State government has gone further to close down the offending company.

Many years ago, unknown persons dumped toxic waste in Koko in Delta State. This affected both the environment and the health of many in the area including the gentleman who gave out his land for the heinous purpose. The land was eventually rid of the toxic waste at enormous cost to the state. A repeat of this is unacceptable.

The fear is also real that the surrounding farmlands and waters from which the people earn their livelihood may be polluted. Urgent steps should be taken to address this situation. To this end, we expect the politicians who represent the Taaba community at the local, state and federal levels to work in concert and pursue this matter with a view to bringing to their electorate the necessary government assistance as well as extracting commensurate reparation from the offending company. Furthermore, we would think that the people of the Niger Delta already have enough environmental damage to contend with; they are routinely the victims of insensitive corporate gestures and in the hands of government as well. Government must therefore treat this matter with the seriousness that it deserves.

It is noteworthy that this incident only came to public knowledge through Hon. Leyii Kwane, the state legislator representing the Khana Local Council Area who stumbled on the location where the dead fishes were dumped while in Taaba to inspect

The company involved has behaved very badly indeed, and we consider the response of the state government so far to be inadequate. The company has acted in a manner that endangers the environment and put the lives of the citizens of the Taaba community at risk. The type and level of this risk is, even now, yet to be determined as the result of a laboratory analysis of the fish is still being awaited.

Special Adviser to the Governor on Environment, Ipalibo Harry described the conduct of the company as wicked and insensitive. It is much more than that. The fact that the company surreptitiously dumped its unwholesome fish not far out in the sea, but so close to human habitation amounts to a deliberate crime for which the business as body corporate as well as everyone of its directors should be subjected to sanction. Residents of the Ogoni fishing community are reported to have deserted their homes as a result of this incident.

constituency projects. What did the community leaders do as soon as the discovery was made? Did they report the matter to the nearest police authorities and/or the local government?

If so what steps did these persons take and how promptly? It is claimed that the company that dumped the fish perpetrated this act in collusion with a member of the community. The company also pre-empted the government by hurriedly arranging with a faction of the local traditional rulers' council to bury the fishes before laboratory results are released. This incident is murky and yet it is serious because it concerns public health.

A detailed and public investigation that will involve both the Federal Ministry of Environment and NAFDAC must be done. Besides unraveling the technical and other implications of this incident, some persons in position of responsibility may have failed in their duty and/or wilfully betrayed the trust of the community. They must be exposed and sanctioned.