

Anxiety in Enugu community over poisoned stream

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•Our ecosystem destroyed, many hospitalised, residents cry out

•My mother died after drinking poisoned water – Youth

From **Magnus Eze**, Enugu

There is trouble in Nomeh Unataeze Community in Nkanu East Local Government Area of Enugu State. The community is in quandary because Nvuna River, their only source of drinking water and for other domestic uses, was allegedly contaminated recently by effluence from an ethanol company, D-Hap Integrated Services Limited, located at Okagu Ituku, in the neighbouring Awgu Local Government Area.



•Householder displays dead fish in the stream in 2021



•Protesters at company's gate

•Houseowner protesting

•Some states of the protest

With the sad development, many people from the area who drank the water were reportedly hospitalised, while unconfirmed reports indicated that one or two deaths were recorded. A young man from the community, Orji Chinedu, told Daily Sun that his mother, Mrs. Gladys Okonkwo, died after drinking the contaminated water.

“They produce some chemicals that we don’t know and that chemical is killing people. Now, my mother is dead. Ask people about Gladys Okonkwo in Nomeh. The woman drank the water and died. Even the fishes are dead. My brother picked one fish from the river and he is still having stomach problems after eating the fish.

“My own mother is dead, who will give me food again? And their own mother is alive and giving them food. There is no water to wash clothes and to drink,” Chinedu lamented.



•Aggrieved indigene of Nomeh

Unfortunately, a similar incident occurred two years ago. In the community's petition to Governor Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi, dated April 17, 2023, they said: "This recent poisoning of our river comes barely two years since this company channelled chemical waste from their factory into the Nvuna River in March 2021, destroying the aquatic life source, farms, environment and, invariably, the health and wellbeing of Nomeh people.

"While still smarting and recovering from their previous act, D-Hap has again thrown Nomeh into greater distress despite a directive by your government that they stop production since 2021."

According to the petition titled "SOS Appeal: Poisoning of Nvuna River by D-Hap Integrated Services Limited, Enugu," residents were unable to access water for consumption, domestic needs and irrigation of their farmlands, as Nvuna River constitutes the only water source and 'sustainer' of the livelihood of the people, especially during dry season.

"Children are also picking and eating the floating fish killed by the poisonous substances, which could result in severe health situations and death now and in the near and distant future."

Like the 2021 incident, the aquatic life of Nomeh people was totally destroyed as fishes and other organisms in the river perished and floated on the water, in addition to a foul smell that pervaded the air.

The petition, signed by the councillor of Nomeh Ward, Hon. Jonathan Orji, and president-general, Nomeh Unataeze Town Union, Ogbonna Nwachukwu, sought the governor's quick intervention in the face of the community's emergency situation.

Their three prayers were for the factory to be shut down "to avert further release of poisonous substances into Nvuna River;

"Exercising the full weight of the extant laws of Enugu State and sanction it for this illegal and inhuman action that has caused Nomeh people untold and grave health, environmental and material challenges and losses; and

"Importantly sending palliatives to the community to help the people cope with the present harrowing situation occasioned by the Nvuna poisoning."

A similar petition was sent to the zonal office of National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESRA) and they appealed to the agency to immediately deploy its expertise in saving the community.

In search of solutions to their plight, some members of the community, consisting of the traditional ruler, elders, women and youths, staged a peaceful protest at the company's entrance on Tuesday, April 18.

A former councillor of Nomeh Ward, Michael Anichukwu, who, incidentally, had approached the company two years ago when harmful waste from the firm affected them, regretted that the unfortunate incident recurred.

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He recalled that the then commissioner for environment, Chijioke Edeoga, visited the river and the company, where he told them of the governor's mandate for him to seal the place.

He said: "I came here with the Igwe of Nومه Unataeze and other stakeholders with the commissioner for environment, Hon. Chijioke Edeoga. Edeoga told this company when we were in the process of settling and putting an end to this evil and deadly pollution that the governor gave him an order to shut down the company. But, considering the people that worked here, the employment opportunities, he ordered the company to shut down operations until they find another alternative means of disposing their waste and they promised to do that and that the pollution wouldn't happen ever again.

"To our greatest surprise, last week, that same stream was now polluted more than that of March 15, 2021. And, unknowingly, some of our elderly people were still making use of the water, children were still making use of the water and the health implication is very dangerous. Some of them are in the hospital. Some are dead."

Expressing disappointment, Anichukwu accused the company, which prides itself as the best manufacturer of edible ethanol, of showing the highest level of insensitivity, stressing that: "They don't care about human lives. All they care about is making money. They don't care whether people die while they make money."

He also used the opportunity to let the governor know that all the efforts made in March and April 2021 with the Ministry of Environment were futile.

"We want the government to be sincere this time around. If the government allows this company to continue to exist, that means the government wants the whole community to be wiped off," he stated.

Another stakeholder from the community, Dr. Chukwudi Anyianuka, begged the company to stop poisoning their river, stressing that, "It is our source of life; that is where we feed from. It waters our plants. This is where we catch fish to provide something for our community. We do not need your 'pure water.' We want our rivers to be clean.

"We are using this opportunity to appeal to the federal government and the state government that D-Hap Integrated Limited deserves to be sanctioned. They have violated the laws that govern disposal of waste. The implication of this thing is that people are not only dying but that, in the future, people are going to develop cancers of all kinds. So, we do not want it to continue. As much as we desire to see companies thrive in Enugu, we don't want the ones that will begin to kill people because they want to make profit. That is our demand."

Staffers of the company said that the managing director, identified as Mr. Ejike, was not on seat when the protesters came calling. Later, when Daily Sun called him on phone, he said he was in the middle of a meeting.

However, the stores manager, Onuko Ndubisi, who was on hand, disclosed that the firm was still investigating the alleged toxic waste release. He commended Nومه people for their peaceful protest, assuring them that the issue would be thoroughly resolved.

Onuko said: "We are still investigating to know the source of this spillage and this pollution. Because we engaged those who were evacuating the water far away. So, what we are trying to tell you is that we are not responsible on the grounds that we have contractors handling it. That was why we said that we were still investigating to know. That was why we met the Igwe on this issue, and we are still trying to negotiate to handle this issue. Therefore, we want you people to calm down so that there will be peaceful resolution and it will be a peaceful engagement that will help us and you people."

He further disclosed that the company had arranged three trucks laden with sachet water for delivery at the community to ameliorate their plight, before they got wind that the protesters were coming.

He said: “When we heard that you people were coming, we said we will first see and address you people because, after this press event, our team will move down to Nomeh and see things for themselves and also with the bags of sachet water to make sure that you people enjoy.”

Meanwhile, the mere mention of truckloads of sachet water further infuriated the youths of Nomeh as they shouted: “We don’t need your pure water; stop poisoning our water.”

It took the intervention of their leaders to calm the already charged atmosphere at that point.

In an interview, assistant production manager of the company, Kehinde Oladehin, said every effort would be made to get to the root of the whole thing.

Oladehin, who said that he had not joined the company when the 2021 incident occurred, suspected sabotage. He disclosed that, before any production took place, the contractors would usually evacuate 10 tankers of waste water. He explained that, if indeed there was a spill, then something went wrong somewhere.

“We’ve heard what they complained about. We see their anger; we see their plight also. They are mentioning food poisoning, it is not a joke. I’ve spoken to their Igwe as well. All these things they have listed are problems and there is a solution to them. The solution the Igwe mentioned is that we should stop working for now and that the company should come and meet their elders, which is very simple. So, with what he has said, we will try and communicate all these back to the management and they will effectively handle it. The two parties will be able to agree and continue with their lives,” he said.

It could not be confirmed whether the issue was contained as at press time.

Information on the company’s website showed that it produces seven million litres of edible ethanol per annum and over one million tonnes of pigment as well as livestock feed raw material.