

## Sudan villagers, environment suffer from oil boom



By Bogonko Bosire AFP - 1 hour 52 minutes ago

RIER, Sudan (AFP) - Kicked out of sleepy Nile fishing hamlets lost forever to Sudan's oil boom, villagers in the south curse a refinery for causing forced relocations, for spreading disease and ravaging the [environment](#). Activists also warn that the 2006 arrival of White Nile Petroleum Company (WNPOC), a consortium led by Malaysia's Petronas, in Unity State threatens the Sudd wetlands, the world's largest maze of swamps, lagoons and tributaries.

Villagers say thousands were forcefully evicted to make way for a low-sulphur crude oil venture in south-central Sudan. They say they lost venerated ancestral homes, died from contamination and saw livelihoods jeopardised.

"Since 2006, 27 adults and three children have died because of contaminated water from the oil field," said Paul Bol Ruoth, county commissioner in Koch, about 70 kilometres (44 miles) from Bentiu, the state capital.

The oil firm has not been reachable for comment on the allegations.

But more than 1,000 people are now sick with unknown [illnesses](#) and among the fatalities, only three have been compensated by WNPOC, local officials said.

Despite US-led sanctions to push Sudan to resolve the bloody war in Darfur, direct foreign investment in Sudan soared to 2.3 billion dollars in 2006, fueled by [energy](#)-hungry Asian economies led by China and Malaysia, just seven years after the country began exporting crude oil.

"The company (WNPOC) has no right. It's our people who have the right over their land because they need it for grazing and clean water," said Ruoth.

Deluged by a barrage of complaints from hapless villagers whose lives were already fractured by decades of civil war, he led a delegation in mid-February to assess the toll on the environment from the oil refinery.

"Since water is contaminated, we have lost several cows and goats," said an elder from the Nuer ethnic group, too fearful to give his name when talking to reporters on a visit to the area.

"We need help," he said, staring hopelessly at plumes of smoke from the Thar Jath oil refinery, named after the former village evacuated to make way for the complex and sitting in the heart of the partly drained Sudd swamp.

Villagers may be mesmerised by new roads and electricity cables, but they have seen little tangible improvement to their squalid lifestyle.

Now they are furious at the prospect of swanky hotels and malls in the swampy heartland, where government troops and ex-southern rebels pounded once each other with high explosives in the 21-year-old civil war.

"We do not care about the new development they promised us. All we need is our old, clean environment," said [unemployed](#) Peter Riek Gieng, 25, who worked as a casual labourer to help build the refinery.

When oil is extracted, large amounts of saline water, or brine, are injected into the sub-surface to maintain the pressure of oil reservoirs, which enhances oil recovery, said [human rights](#) and Christian aid group Sign of Hope.

Sample results seen by AFP indicated that brine from the refinery produced a high salinity, putting the concentration of nitrate at 81.6 mg/l, well above the 10 mg/l recommended by the the US Environmental Protection Agency.

"A nitrate concentration amounting to 81.6 mg/l can have serious effects especially on young children," said Sign of Hope in a statement.

"Infants below the age of six months who drink water containing nitrate in this dose could become seriously ill and, if untreated, may die," it said.

The head of the organisation, Reimund Reubelt, called on the authorities to act now to prevent an ecological catastrophe.

"We also see a looming ecological catastrophe for the largest swamplands of the world. To secure public health the government must now improve the quality of drinking water dramatically and at the same time prevent an ecological catastrophe," he added.

At Riek village, where local residents were relocated to make way for the Thar Jath refinery about 6.5 kilometres (four miles) away, children play around a bore-hole abandoned as a source of water for health concerns.

One oil employee, who requested to remain unnamed, told journalists that he witnessed oil workers dumping industrial waste into a nearby isolated pit in a dried swamp, which will flood in the rainy season.

"I usually see men in aprons dig up huge pits and dump toxic wastes. They do not let anybody near that area," he said.

But aid workers complain that the administration in southern Sudan is reluctant to address the issue since officials are profiting from oil wealth.

Some villagers promised a Nigeria-like struggle on oil companies.

"If the government ignores, us we will go Nigeria style," said Martin Luang, a rugged middle-aged villager alluding to the wave of kidnappings of oil workers and relations of prominent Nigerians in the restive Niger Delta.

Sudan's oil production is estimated to reach between 500,000 and 600,000 barrels per day this year, but output is expected to rise in coming years and the boom in exploration is mainly in the southern region.

Although the north-south Sudan civil war ended with a peace agreement in 2005, both sides still bicker over shares of oil revenue.