

“The poisoning of South Sudan is about to achieve a new magnitude”

Interview with Klaus Stieglitz, Deputy Chairperson, Sign of Hope, on Africa's potentially greatest environmental crime.

Executive summary

Half of South Sudan's population is experiencing or facing famine. This hunger has joined with thirst and fighting (the civil war raging through most of the country) in causing one third of the population to flee.

The root of all these evils is Big Oil, which – abetted by South Sudan's corrupt government - has poisoned South Sudan's politics, lives, environment – specifically its ground water.

And now this Nightmare Team is planning on dramatically expanding South Sudan's production of oil. Get ready for an unprecedented environmental disaster.

Briefing: Sign of Hope

Name: Hoffnungszeichen Sign of Hope e.V.

Website:

www.hoffnungszeichen.de

Founded in 1983

People assisted: more than 3 million in 21 countries

Headquartered in Konstanz, Germany

Chairperson: Reimund Reubelt

Deputy Chairperson: Klaus Stieglitz

Discovering the shocking, criminal poisoning of South Sudan's water

Risking life and limb to scientifically document it.

Taking on some of the world's most powerful and devious companies and their lobbies to try to put an end to it.

While also providing holistically effective development work.

This is the story of Sign of Hope.

Briefing: state of and plans for South Sudan's oil industry

South Sudan would sound like the most improbable place in the world to stage nowadays a high-level international business conference.

And that's because it's one of the most suffering, poorest and unsafe places in the world.

Of South Sudan's 12.5 million inhabitants, slightly less than half are already starving – or are imminently facing such. Caused by an incessant and grisly civil war raging throughout the country, this famine has caused nearly 4 million South Sudanese to flee their homes.

Notwithstanding the wars raging across the country and the suffering of its population, a business conference - South Sudan Oil & Power – will in fact be staged on October 11-12, 2017. Its venue will be a high rise in the country's capital of Juba.

The conference's goal has been stated to be the “attracting the investment by major oil corporations required to substantially ramp up South Sudan's production of oil”, which currently comes to 130,000 barrels a year. These investors, in turn, have expressed considerable interest in repairing extant dedicated infrastructure – and in creating new facilities.

Interview: Klaus Stieglitz

Question

How can investors expect to run operations in a country roiled by warfare and by mass treks of desperate and dying people?

Klaus Stieglitz

It is important to note that a number of the oil companies that are now planning to relaunch and expand their activities are those that helped put South Sudan in this terrible state – by not adhering to the corporate governance and environmental standards that they are so fond of proclaiming in their corporate brochures.

A result of their failure has been the poisoning of politics (through corruption), lives and water in South Sudan. The latter problem – taking the form of the pollution of groundwater with heavy metals and noxious chemicals in regions in and around oil fields – has also been a cause of widespread devastation to humans, their livestock and the environment - specifically the Sudd, which is one of the world's largest wetlands.

Based on the oil companies' track record of unscrupulous exploitation and other devious practices, it would not be realistic to expect them to display any form of awareness of the societal and environmental implications of their operations in South Sudan – or even to hope that they will address their past misdeeds.

What this means: the ramping up of oil production in South Sudan will dramatically exacerbate what is already one of Africa's major environmental crimes.

Question

What is the extent of the oil companies' poisoning of the groundwater in South Sudan, what are the consequences, and what actions need to be undertaken to remedy or at least alleviate these?

Klaus Stieglitz

More than 180,000 people residing in the vicinity of the Thar Jath oil field have been affected by the oil companies' failures to take measures capable of preventing poisonous runoffs from seeping into aquifers. These aquifers are the source of the water drunk by residents and their livestock – and often used in irrigating their field.

The consumption of polluted water has given these residents a large number of chronic, life threatening ailments. The poisoning of the water has destroyed these residents' livestock and thus their livelihoods – and is about to devastate the Sudd, which is located in the vicinity of the oilfields.

Large though these figures are, they only apply to this oil field. Similar problems are being experienced elsewhere in South Sudan.

Urgently needed to help the victims is to proceed with the drilling of wells deep enough to tap sources unaffected by the pollution. Sign of Hope itself has facilitated the drilling and deepening of 6 wells. Also urgently needed is a region-covering program of specialized medical treatment capable of addressing the effects of lead poisoning and the like.

Since, however, many medical and development workers have withdrawn from this region – and elsewhere in South Sudan – to escape the civil war, and since those who have remained to do their jobs are thus risking their lives on a daily basis, the greatest need is peace.

Most strongly required is, however, none of the above. What is needed are changes of hearts and practices on the part of China National Petroleum, Malaysia's Petronas, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and other oil companies operating in South Sudan. Their stepping up of oil production and thus of their unethical dumping of wastes into the ambient environment will cause what is already one of Africa's greatest environmental crimes to get worse, a lot worse.

Key fact: South Sudan has the world's 20th largest proven oil reserves. A full-scale exploitation of them – should it be joined with the lack of adherence to internationally-binding environmental standards – would give rise to an unprecedented environmental disaster.