

“Our lives are at stake!”

“Deadly black tide of oil contamination”: protests erupt throughout South Sudan

By Francis Michael Gwang, We Are Witness

August 24, 2018

“Spills from the oil wells owned by Petronas are endangering the lives of more than 50,000 residents of Tarjas,” states Lam Tongar, the minister of information for Northern Liech state. Tarjas is an oil-producing region in the state, which is located in South Sudan.

This threat to their lives stems from the oil's having made its way into the residents' main sources of water. Petronas is owned by the Malaysian government, and is one of the three largest multinationals – along with China National Petroleum and India's ONGC Videsh – forming part of the consortia pumping oil in South Sudan.

Issued at the beginning of August, Tongar's cry for help is being echoed throughout South Sudan. The existence of the oil spill and its endangering of residents have been confirmed by an official working for the country's ministry of petroleum. He blamed the spill and contamination and the lack of clean-up and remedial actions in general on the oil-caused civil war raging in South Sudan – and on government's failure to enforce such environmental laws as South Sudan's Oil Act of 2012.

This contamination by oil spills and wastes is particularly pronounced in South Sudan's Unity and Upper Nile regions, home to more than 200,000 people.

And – as is the case every year – this problem is going to get worse, a lot worse in autumn's rainy season.

Each autumn's heavy rains wash over the oil rigs – many of them derelict and thus leaky and most without proper disposal of oil wastes – and surrounding areas.

The rainwater thus contaminated then makes its ways into residents' wells, rivers and water holes, which the runoff turns into “poison pits”, called such because they are full of lead, barium and other toxic materials.

“These are pretty much are our only sources of water,” states Palino, a resident of Paryang town, which is located in the oil-producing state of Ruweng.

In view of Ruweng's reliance upon rain water and its great density of oil fields, it's not surprising that the state has been an epicenter of what residents call “a deadly black tide of oil contamination”. Deadly because – among many other kinds of fatalities and health problems – this contamination has produced a rate of miscarriages and deformed fetuses that the government of South Sudan, in its first Report on the Environment, pegged at 85% of all pregnancies in the region. The report was issued in May, 2018, and was compiled by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Insert: 85% of all pregnancies in oil-contaminated areas result in miscarriages and deformed babies – states the government of South Sudan

It is thus entirely logical that the South Sudan-wide protests against the “deadly black tide” have been particularly persistent and vociferous in Ruweng.

Protested throughout the country is being “economic cleansing”, in which residents have been driven from homes to make way for oil production facilities – and their not receiving any compensation for such.

Another target of protests: the placement of such facilities immediately adjacent to villages, although such results in villagers' direct exposure to a witches' brew of pollutants.

This, in turn, has caused what residents call “the massacre of our livestock and fields” – both due to polluted water. These too have never been compensated, even though a plan to require such oil companies as Petronas to do provide such funding – totaling in the millions of South Sudanese pounds was enacted in 2013. This plan was based on the comprehensive assessment of the losses suffered by residents compiled. The oil companies blame the civil war and the cessation of production it has caused for their failure to follow through.