

In the air

Ken Saro-Wiwa

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Exactly ten years ago tomorrow, on November 10th 1995, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight Ogoni colleagues were hanged by the Nigerian government for protesting against the devastation of the Niger Delta by Shell and other petrol companies and demanding basic human rights such as clean air, land and water.

Saro-Wiwa fell foul of powerful interests by daring to suggest it was possible to make poverty history in his country. Nigeria, he pointed out, was rich in natural resources; what kept the Nigerian people in abject poverty was their government's grovelling collaboration with the multinationals who were quite literally draining the country's resources dry.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was a man of many parts: entrepreneur, journalist, television producer, writer – and political activist, one in a long series of brave hearts who have risen in outrage against man's exploitation of man.

Nothing in his early life predestined him for a martyr's death – except for one basic fact: he was born an Ogoni, a group of some 550.000 farmers and fishermen, on whose homelands in the Niger Delta Shell struck oil in 1958. Since then, Shell has extracted an estimated \$30 billion worth of oil; the only payment the Ogoni have received is to see their fertile farmlands laid waste by oil spills and acid rain, their wildlife and fish decimated and their livelihood all but destroyed.

Ken was born in Rivers State on 10th October 1941 into a relatively well-to-do family – his father a businessman and community chief, his mother a farmer. At 13, he won a scholarship to Government College in Umuahia and was a model pupil, taking to the English way of life the school promoted. After graduating from Ibadan University, he taught at Umuahia and the University of Lagos, where some of his earliest writings appeared in the student magazine he edited. During the civil war in Biafra, he served as administrator of the oil depot at Bonny Island. He was later appointed regional commissioner for education in the Rivers State Cabinet, but was sacked in 1973 for his views on Ogoni autonomy.

A number of successful business ventures during the late 1970s enabled Saro-Wiwa to concentrate on his writing and in 1985, he published his first novel, *Sozaboy: A novel in Rotten English*. This anti-war work was written in „pidgin“ English – the title is pidgin for „soldier boy“ – a dialect spoken by many

Nigerians. Influenced by Joyce, he was fascinated by the literary possibilities of different styles of language.

He was a socially committed author, writing about the role of women, the environment and denouncing the crimes of Shell among others. A popular TV series for young people was banned by the military dictatorship in 1992.

Through his writing, Saro-Wiwa became increasingly involved in the Ogoni's fight for justice.



Photo: sierraclub.org

Ken Saro-Wiwa hanged for Shell

In 1990, he founded the *Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP)* and helped draft a Bill of Rights, setting out the movement's demands for autonomy, a fair share of the proceeds of oil extraction and repair of the environmental damage done to Ogoni lands. In January 1993, more than 300.000 Ogoni took part in a peaceful march, which drew international attention to the dramatic situation in the Niger Delta. Shortly afterwards Shell, alleging acts of sabotage against its installations, ceased operations in Ogoniland.

Then the government stepped in.

In May 1994, Saro-Wiwa was abducted from his home and thrown into a

military prison, together with other MOSOP leaders. The charge was incitement to murder, following the deaths of four Ogoni elders believed to be sympathetic to the Nigerian military. The military itself took control of Ogoniland, subjecting the people to mass arrest, rape, murder, burning and looting.

In a letter to *The Guardian* newspaper, Ken laid the blame on the British government, „which supplies arms and credit to the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha of Nigeria, knowing full well that all such arms will only be used against innocent, unarmed citizens.“

In October 1995, a military tribunal „tried“ Saro-Wiwa and convicted him of murder. Despite governments and citizens' organizations worldwide condemning the trial as a fraudulent farce, his execution, together with eight comrades in arms, took place ten days later.

Before going to the gallows, Saro-Wiwa told his judges: „I and my colleagues are not the only ones on trial. Shell is here on trial. (...) The company has, indeed, ducked this particular trial, but its day will surely come.“

His body was buried in an unmarked grave in Port Harcourt.

Following the executions, Shell and other petrol companies announced new policies, aimed at brightening up their tarnished image. But ten years on, the true nature of „corporate social responsibility“ is nowhere more visible than in the polluted and conflict-torn Niger Delta. Ten years on, 70 per cent of Nigerians are still „living“ on less than \$1 a day, while Shell makes profits of some \$100 a minute.

Ken Saro-Wiwa was awarded the alternative Nobel Prize in 1994. In 1995, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and received the 1995 Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa.

Tomorrow sees the announcement in London of the winner of the „Remember Saro-Wiwa“ competition, launched to mark the 10th anniversary of the executions, and draw attention to the continuing crisis in the Niger Delta, where the issues Ken fought and died for remain as urgent as ever.

Nobel laureate Harold Pinter wrote on the execution of his fellow-playwright: „murder is the most brutal form of censorship.“

And yet ... as fellow writer and activist, Muepu Muamba, our partner and friend, wrote on the day following Ken's death, in a poem white-hot with rage (see page 20), „and yet, / I can assure you, / the poet does not perish: / he is reborn in the subversive word, / which vouches for the inalienable dignity of the earth.“