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By Alfred Ilenre, EMIROAF Secretary-General

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Mr Chairman,

I represent the Ethnic Minority and Indigenous Rights Organisation of Africa (EMIROAF) as the Secretary-General. My name is Alfred Abora Ilenre of the Edo indigenous tribe from the Niger Delta of Nigeria. EMIROAF is a non-partisan, non-governmental organisation dedicated to research in the area of economic capacitation, gender empowerment, conflicts resolution, human rights and environmental protection of indigenous, tribal and ethnic minority peoples in Africa. We feel proud to be associated with the United Nations Permanent Forum on indigenous issues and all its activities.

Our basic objectives include the mobilisation of indigenous peoples to the full realisation of their basic human and environmental rights and how to defend them, using the mechanisms of non-violence throughout the African continent.

Case studies conducted all over Africa among the Edo, Ogoni, and the Ijaw indigenous communities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, the Batwa indigenous peoples in the Central African Region, the San people and the bushmen in Southern Africa show a common trend of pervading economic neglect and environmental degradation throughout African indigenous territories.

The case of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria deserves special mention, Mr Chairman, because it demonstrates how African nation states have been insensitive to the plight of African indigenous communities.

The neglect of the Niger Delta has been caused by the distortion of the original federal structure negotiated with the British colonialists by Nigerian's founding fathers which laid emphasis on self-determination, for the federating ethnic nationalities and revenue sharing based on derivation. The Nigerian military on seizing power in 1966 dismissed the original federal constitution and replaced it with a unitary system backed by military decrees and a unitarianist cantonment rules, laws and regulations.

The Niger Delta region produces more than 90 percent of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings. The environment of the area as the consequences of vast oil exploration and extraction has been degraded. What the people want is the decentralisation of state power that will guarantee self determination to the federating nationalities.

The ecology of the entire Niger Delta is today burdened by acute environmental degradation because the centralised administration of Nigeria is incapable of providing basic social services that can ameliorate the environmental problems.

The vast tropical forest zone is experiencing various levels of environmental conflict. The conflicts are linked to oil mining by trans-national corporations in collaboration with the Nigerian central government.

The indigenous, tribal and ethnic minority nationalities of the Niger Delta are the immediate victims of the social effects of environmental degradation. The relationship between

environmental degradation and conflict has acquired increased intensity in Nigeria in recent times.

The indigenous people complain of the effect of oil exploration in their environment whose aftermath have been pollution and inadequate farmlands-The environmentally induced conflict has also created ethnic divide, inter and intra community violence which has affected national cohesion. The acute nature of the conflict has the potential of creating distabillising effect on regional stability, and vast international repercussions. Close observers percieve the environmental conflict in the Niger Delta of Nigeria as grave as it affects the survival of millions of indigenous peoples and their daily livelihood.

In an attempt to lessen tension the Nigerian federal government two years ago set up the Niger Delta Development Commission to promote socio-economic development so as to contain communal conflicts. Inspite of the professed NDDC community assistance projects, agitations, violence and threat of armed conflicts in the Niger Delta have broadened in scope. Discerning observers argue that the chances of the NDDC succeeding was very limited since it is not focused on issues that can integrate economic, social and environmental components of the sustainable development in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

In conclusion, Mr Chairman, it is extremely impossible for enemy tribes of multi-cultural background, each with different world outlook to live together and make stable progress without first discussing the basis of their co-existence.

EMIROAF fully supports the call for the restructuring of the Nigerian nation--state through a sovereign national conference so as to give autonomy to the federating ethnic and indigenous nationalities.

The assistance, encouragement and goodwill of the United Nations is required in this direction, for only a restructured Nigerian union can guarantee peace, stability and environmental harmony to the people of the Niger Delta of Nigeria and indeed the entire Africa.

Thanks

Alfred Ilenre