

## INTERNATIONAL

## Several mass graves found in Cote d'Ivoire

*Special to Sentinel-Voice from IPS*

United Nations workers have discovered three mass graves in the rebel-held north of Cote d'Ivoire containing at least 99 bodies, announced the UN mission in that country.

"Some of these people were killed by bullets," said a UN statement. "According to reliable and consistent witness accounts, others died from suffocation."

The UN added that the dead were killed in fighting between warring rebel factions on June 20-21, after a reported failed attempt to assassinate the rebels' political leader Guillaume Soro.

At the time, rights group Amnesty International said it had reports that dozens of people had been arrested by Soro's troops in

retaliation and had then suffocated to death after being held in containers.

Others, said the group, appeared to have been beheaded.

The UN has not disclosed whether there were any civilians among the dead in the mass grave discovered at Korhogo.

The north of Cote d'Ivoire has been controlled by rebels since September 2002, when they launched a coup attempt. Government forces held onto the southern half of the west African country, and after much fighting, the conflict was declared to have finished last year. However, sporadic fighting continues, and the rebels and government have yet to agree on how the country will be administered and run.



### READY FOR BATTLE

An Iraqi militiaman, loyal to radical Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al Sadr, carries a rocket propelled grenade launcher past a closed tourist stall on Tuesday in the southern city of Najaf. The city has been torn by strife and combat between U.S. and Iraqi forces.

## Nigeria's petroleum industry reeling

OMADINO, Nigeria (AP) - In unrest comparable in scale to Chechnya and Colombia, a year of bloodletting has killed more than 1,000 in the oil-rich Niger Delta — leaving the world's No. 7 oil exporter, and people here, concerned for the future.

Tensions over oil revenues have aggravated ethnic strife. Kidnappings and sabotage have escalated, forcing costly shutdowns by companies pumping crude in the oil-rich swamps of the volatile Niger Delta.

Here at Omadino, just the sound of speedboats was enough to send villagers fleeing one day recently. "They were afraid. They just ran away," said Gabriel Walter, 42, the only resident who stayed to meet visiting journalists.

Walter would not say whether it was Nigerian security forces or ethnic militants that the townspeople feared. Both groups are known to go on killing rampages.

The growing insecurity in Nigeria's most lucrative industry comes as oil prices briefly hit a record intraday trading high Tuesday of \$44.24 a barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange. That followed a heightened U.S. terror alert and supply concerns in Russia and OPEC, of which Nigeria is a key member.

Major oil companies hope to double production in West Africa's Gulf of Guinea, estimated to hold up to 10 percent of the world's oil reserves. The United States, Europe and Asia are increasingly looking to the region's

oil as an alternative to crude from the Middle East.

The Nigerian subsidiary of San Ramon, Calif.-based ChevronTexaco Corp. is among the companies hit hardest by Nigeria's worsening oil-related violence, suffering an estimated \$750 million in costs from sabotage to its wells, pipelines and other facilities since March 2003.

Sixteen months later, the company still can't restart production at pipeline pump stations and wells considered unusable or unsafe, resulting in production losses estimated at more than \$1 billion.

Royal Dutch/Shell, Nigeria's largest oil operation, which produces half the 2.5 million barrels Nigeria exports daily, also is reeling.

A confidential 93-page security report commissioned by Shell in December 2003 and obtained by The Associated Press and other news organizations warns that mounting attacks by criminals and ethnic militants could force the oil giant to abandon its onshore operations in the delta by 2008.

Shell spokesman Simon Buerk rejects the possibility of a company pullout.

"We don't agree with that conclusion. We are committed to our operations in Nigeria," Buerk told the AP.

Other company officials concede, however, that the firm is increasingly turning its attention to offshore oil fields because it considers them safer from attack by bandits and activists.

The report's authors made other serious conclusions: that Shell "exacerbates conflict" in the way it gives cash

and contracts to delta residents and offers "stay-at-home pay" to disgruntled youths.

Buerk accepted that Shell "sometimes inadvertently contributes to conflict," yet stressed the company was working to overcome "critical shortcomings in some areas of our interaction with communities."

"The demand for and payment of cash to community youths for access fees, standby labor and homage, amongst others has been blamed for some inter-community disputes and for distorting genuine community needs," Buerk said.

In recent months, Shell has created a new community development strategy to "abolish corrosive practices that currently impede sustainable development in communities, chiefly the pressure for cash payments for non-legitimate reasons, such as payment for 'ghost labor,'" Buerk added.

Such "lack of transparency" encourages villagers to fight Shell — and each other — for a share of the oil money, the report's authors concluded. Shell's "social license to operate is fast-eroding," the report said.

Delta residents complain their elected leaders have failed to fight poverty in the region. The residents, most of whom earn less than \$1 a day despite the region's petroleum wealth, accuse oil companies of colluding with Nigeria's government to foment divisions between rival community groups in a strategy to deprive them of oil earnings.

The Shell-commissioned

report's authors say there is "no evidence" companies have these sinister motives. Yet the authors warn that some oil company employees do "engage in criminal activities" that deprive residents of benefits.

Militants and other groups which increasingly use sophisticated equipment to siphon oil from pipelines for resale to tankers bound for Europe, Asia and South America. Nigeria's government estimates the industry loses up to 300,000 barrels a day — the equivalent of 15 percent of total exports.

Another growing concern for oil multinationals, company officials privately acknowledge, is the possibility of being blamed for killings, robberies or other abuses inflicted by Nigerian police and soldiers trying to control the restive delta.

Earlier this month, security forces raided five delta villages, leaving 15 people dead and ransacking and burning homes, according to witnesses and militants. The operation was part of an effort to combat attacks on multinational oil operations, the security forces said.

In March, a U.S. federal judge in San Francisco ruled that ChevronTexaco could be made to stand trial for civil damages in the United States on allegations that its Nigerian subsidiary was linked to the deaths of nine people allegedly shot by soldiers during protests on an offshore oil platform in 1998. ChevronTexaco has denied any wrongdoing.

Similar U.S. cases are pending against other oil con-  
(See Nigeria, Page 15)

## Mauritania detains officers in alleged plot

NOUAKCHOTT, Mauritania (AP) - Mauritania arrested several military officers Monday in an alleged assassination plot against the president, military officials said. Military members in the Arab-dominated desert nation were restricted to barracks nationwide, the officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Normal patrols stopped in the capital, Nouakchott.

Dozens of soldiers with heavy weapons took up positions at the capital's electricity plant.

There was no immediate confirmation or denial from the West African nation's government of the alleged plot against President Maaouya Sid'Ahmed Ould Taya.

The arrests allegedly occurred Monday morning. Those arrested included a lieutenant colonel, among other officers, the officials said, without specifying how many people were detained.

They were hoping to carry out their plan, but it was derailed at the last moment," said one official.

State radio and TV continued broadcasts as normal, and no extra guards were seen at the media stations — generally the first targets in any takeover attempt.

Taya has held power since December 1984. He withstood a June 2003 coup attempt that triggered days of fighting in the capital. Taya has allied himself with the United States in the war on terror, a dramatic change from 1991, when he condemned the U.S.-led coalition that ousted Saddam Hussein's soldiers from Kuwait in the Gulf War.

Mauritania is overwhelmingly Islamic, and straddles Arab and African worlds on the edge of the Sahara. The country has drawn increased interest internationally with oil exploration offshore.

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