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REVEALED: Britain rebuffed Nelson Mandela's appeal for oil sanctions against Nigeria after it executed environmentalists

By Phil Miller and Mark Curtis • 31 December 2019

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Phil Miller and Mark Curtis

WE HAVE A GAME CHANGER ORDER NOW

REVEALED: Britain rebuffed Nelson Mandela's appeal for oil sanctions against Nigeria after it executed environmentalists

By Phil Miller and Mark Curtis • 31 December 2019

The British government rejected Nelson Mandela's personal appeal to impose oil sanctions on Nigeria after its military regime executed nine environmental activists in 1995 as it wanted to protect oil company Shell's commercial interests, newly declassified files reveal.

The British files, released under the country's declassification rules, show that UK officials sought "to take some of the heat out of the sanctions debate" that raged after the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other members of Nigeria's Ogoni community.

Saro-Wiwa had led a non-violent protest campaign against pollution by Anglo-Dutch company Shell and other energy firms in the oil-rich Niger Delta. The so-called "Ogoni 9" were executed on 10 November 1995, following a military tribunal that was condemned internationally, especially by South Africa's President Nelson Mandela.

Britain's Prime Minister John Major publicly criticised the executions, which he described as "terrible" and claimed he wanted to see "a fundamental and lasting change in the way Nigeria is governed".

However, behind the scenes officials in his government worked to prevent sanctions being imposed on Nigeria's oil industry and protect Shell's investments in the country.

The files show that a day before the executions, British officials compiled a summary of UK investments in Nigeria, concluding that these were worth up to £5 billion. Shell topped the list of "major UK investors", producing half of Nigeria's two million barrels per day output. The company was also said to be "interested in Nigeria's gas reserves" and was on the verge of "the largest industrial project in Nigeria this century", one file states.

From: D F Richmond

Date: 9 November 1995

cc: Mr Meyer
Mr Goodenough

Mr Lyne *JK*

UK/NIGERIA TRADE AND INVESTMENT

UK exports to Nigeria: £457 million in 1994

UK imports from Nigeria: £124 million in 1994

UK investment in Nigeria estimated at £3-5 billion.

Major UK investors include:

Shell: Nigeria's largest joint venture partner in oil production (half of Nigeria's 2 million barrels/day output is produced by Shell). Shell are interested in Nigeria's gas reserves which far exceed their oil reserves and are entirely unexploited. The Shell-led Nigeria LNG project would be the largest industrial project in Nigeria this century. Shell hope to take final decisions this December and start work in 1996.

BP: BP's oil holdings were nationalised in 1979, but they were allowed to re-enter Nigeria in 1992. They have an exploration joint venture and have invested \$100 million so far. Initial drillings struck oil last month (NOT YET ANNOUNCED) and indicate a major off-shore field worth over \$1 billion to BP.

(I sat next to head of NZ BP @ lunch who told same story plus)

BA: Gatwick-Lagos is one of BA's most profitable routes worth £20 million in profits annually.

Guinness: Their third largest market in the world; they announced new investments worth £50 million earlier this year.

D. F. Richmond

D F Richmond

Britain had up to £5 billion invested in Nigeria's economy [PREM 19/5366]

Preventing trade sanctions

Immediately after the executions, British officials listed possible international sanctions that could be imposed on Nigeria, ranging from a sporting ban to stopping arms exports.

However, under the heading "other options with greater risk to UK interests", the officials listed a "freeze on financial assets of Nigerian leaders, trade sanctions" and an "oil embargo".

Three days later, on 13 November 1995, Sam Sharpe, the private secretary to foreign secretary Malcolm Rifkind, reiterated UK reservations about an oil embargo. He told the prime minister's office that "we believe we should hold in reserve for the time being any measures of this kind—which would of course place a disproportionate burden on the UK because of our close ties with Nigeria".

Major's private secretary, Edward Oakden, similarly warned that Shell's commercial interests were at risk and that a trade embargo "would hit the UK disproportionately hard".

Mandela phoned the prime minister the following day, appealing to the UK to "cut off trade" with Nigeria in order to "exert real leverage". In response, Major told Mandela that "we would consider this" and that he "did not have a closed mind about trade sanctions".

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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

14 November 1995

Dear Sam,

NIGERIAN SANCTIONS: MANDELA

Thank you for the very useful table of measures enclosed with your letter of 14 November. The Prime Minister spoke to Mandela (in New Zealand) at 2030 this evening. Jim Bolger was also in the room, and Mandela gave him the telephone to say hello.

Bolger said he had been discussing with Mandela what further measures might be taken, particularly at the UN, to tighten the pressure on Abacha.

The Prime Minister said we too were considering this. The EU had agreed three further measures earlier in the day: an EU-wide arms embargo, the extension of EU visa restrictions to include civilian ministers and their families, and the further restriction of EU aid, to focus it even more tightly on poverty alleviation. Lomé development aid would be suspended. Bolger welcomed all of this. The Prime Minister added that a number of other measures had also been considered, but the Portuguese and others had argued against them, and they had not been pursued.

The Prime Minister said he did not have a closed mind about action in the Security Council. His advice was that any such activity would be blocked by China. But he was happy to consider the issue further and to talk it through.

Mandela retook the phone. He said that he was very conscious that it was easy for South Africa to ask the UK and others to apply oil sanctions, when South Africa had no trade of consequence with Nigeria. South Africa could make the suggestion irresponsibly, because without cost. As Rawlings had explained at CHOGM, the Commonwealth had to rely mainly on moral sanctions, because they had insufficient trade relations with Nigeria to exert real leverage, and had therefore to appeal to those with such relations to take the lead.

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Mandela said that he was therefore appealing to the Prime Minister to consider the possibility of severing trade links with Nigeria. He appreciated the UK's lead in agreeing the EU arms embargo. This went a long way to sending the right message to Abacha. But it would be even more effective if the UK and USA were to cut off trade.

The Prime Minister said that he wanted to speak privately, and frankly, to Mandela. He gave a further account of the three EU measures agreed at the AWG today. The EU had also considered the possibility of an assets freeze, but the Portuguese and others had argued strongly against. Similarly, he understood that there had been no support for EU trade sanctions. The US wanted action in the Security Council, but also seemed to take the view that the scope for action on sanctions was limited, because of the likely Chinese veto. The US was therefore considering some sort of human rights statement, which we thought would probably end up at UNGA rather than the Security Council.

The Prime Minister said that we were therefore considering a range of options. But it would anyway be wise to hold back some of these until after Abacha's speech on 17 November. It was not clear what he would say. But it was not impossible that he would announce some sort of retaliation against the Commonwealth, or even conceivably Nigeria's departure. In that case we might want to have some further measures to take in response. He hoped that, while the UK and others were assessing the options, not too much would be said to the press, to avoid the premature taking of fixed positions.

Mandela said that, following a talk yesterday with Bolger, he had discussed the options for further action with Mbeki and Ramaphosa (in London). They had agreed that he (Mandela) should discuss this further with the Prime Minister and President Clinton. That he would be making these calls had somehow leaked to the South African press. But he repeated that he was making the suggestion of UK action on trade sanctions with all humility. The matter was entirely for the UK. He was only raising it because he felt so strongly about the well-being of Nigeria.

The Prime Minister said that he shared the latter sentiment. He did not have a closed mind about trade sanctions. We would consider this and other options further, both within the Government and with third countries. Meanwhile, if asked, he would confirm to the press that he and Mandela had spoken. He would say that they had discussed all the options for further action against Nigeria, and how to make the existing measures more effective. Mandela said that he was grateful for the Prime Minister's response. He would take a similar public line.

A British declassified document captures John Major's phone call with Nelson Mandela on 14 November 1995 [PREM 19/5366]

But the files suggest Major was being disingenuous in his conversation with Mandela.

A briefing note prepared for the phone call by Oakden, his private secretary, reiterated senior officials' reservations about an oil embargo, noting they "would not be enforceable" and that there was "strong UK commercial interest against this: Shell". It added that the foreign secretary "thinks we should try to hold the line" against sanctions.

Oakden's summary of the phone call disparagingly referred to those "unhelpfully stirring the sanctions pot" and referred again to the "big UK commercial interests involved".

On 18 November 1995 the British government received a letter from Mandela, again urging Major "to take the lead in advocating oil sanctions". The prime minister was "not keen on the idea of oil sanctions", another of his private secretaries wrote.

Yet when Major replied to Mandela on 28 November, he reiterated that "we have not ruled anything out at this stage", also suggesting that oil sanctions were unlikely to garner international support. Major did not mention British commercial interests in Nigeria.

Over the next few weeks, Whitehall continued to resist international pressure for an oil embargo, particularly from Mandela.



British Prime Minister John Major. [EPA/Stringer]

Lobbying for Shell

Shell has long been accused of complicity in the executions of the Ogoni 9. In 2016 four widows of the murdered activists took the company to [court](#) in the Netherlands demanding compensation.

The declassified files show that British officials were in “close touch throughout the crisis” with Shell executives and concerned about the company’s “public relations posture”. The UK High Commission in Lagos even swapped notes with the managing director of Shell Nigeria the day after the executions, commenting that the company was “obviously very concerned that Ogoni hot heads could react to targets of opportunity”.

Conservative peer Lynda Chalker, the then minister for Africa, also met senior Shell executive John Jennings in person a week after the executions. Jennings was reported by a British official to have lamented that: “Shell had not so far been very successful in getting their message across to the public”. He said he was aware that Greenpeace and the Body Shop were “planning a strategy meeting aimed at bringing about a consumer boycott.”

Chalker responded by suggesting that the company should “broadcast the facts about their wider contribution in Nigeria” and assured him that the UK was “resisting pressure coming from the South Africans and some European partners for further economic sanctions.”

She also asked Jennings if the British government could share with Mandela a letter written to Prime Minister Major by Shell, expounding on the company’s claims about its positive impacts in Nigeria. A British official noted, “It should be passed to him [Mandela] but not specifically by us. We don’t want to appear to be endorsing Shell’s position”.

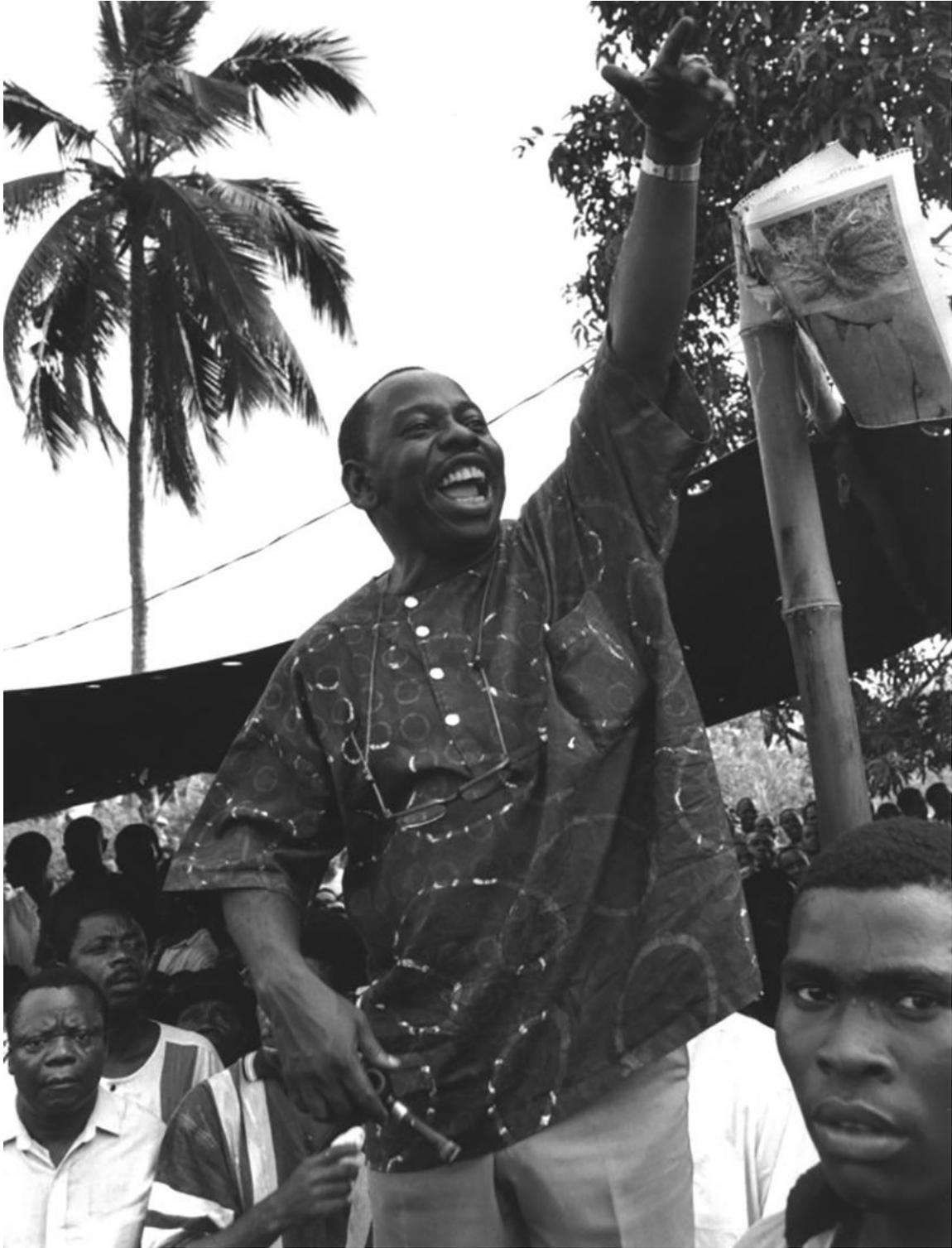


A Nigerian woman dries cassava food with flames from a Shell flow station in the Niger delta behind her. [EPA/Stringer]

Shell's letter to Major insisted that "the emotional charges of environmental devastation that have been laid at the door of Shell in Nigeria ... are false and misleading." It also blamed most of the oil leaks in the Ogoni area on "sabotage" and stated that Shell was spending \$120m on environmental, health and education projects in Nigeria that year.

Downing Street appeared impressed by Shell's argument, with Edward Oakden saying he was "struck by the size of Shell Nigeria's annual expenditure on environmental projects".

Oakden then considered whether the UK could argue against sanctions on Nigerian oil by deploying the same argument used by the British government to oppose a trade boycott of South Africa's apartheid government: that such an embargo would "hit hardest the poor people least able to cope."



Ken Saro-Wiwa speaking at the Ogoni Day demonstration in 1993 [Tim Lambon/Greenpeace]

‘Sanctimonious’ Swedes

Mandela’s call for an oil embargo was echoed by Sweden’s social democratic government, which urged the European Union to go further than simply introducing visa restrictions and an arms embargo on Nigeria. Swedish diplomats said they wanted “a package of sanctions which would make a real impact on the Nigerian regime, not just play to the domestic gallery.”

British diplomats were furious with this demand. One wrote: “Bloody cheek, Swedish – Nigerian trade = 0”. Another claimed it was “The Swedes at their sanctimonious worst. They used to behave like this over South Africa.”

Another disgruntled British official remarked: “Unbelievable. On second thoughts, all too believable. I constantly underestimate the Nordic capacity to posture, while others bear the practical consequences.”

Nigeria’s military ruler General Abacha died in June 1998 before the [international community](#) could reach agreement on oil sanctions, with the [EU](#) debating the matter again just days before he passed away. **DM**

Phil Miller is a staff reporter, and Mark Curtis is editor, of Declassified UK (@DeclassifiedUK)

Reference:

Miller, P. and Curtis, M. (2019). [Britain rebuffed Nelson Mandela’s appeal for oil sanctions against Nigeria after it executed environmentalists](#) from *Daily Maverick*, 31 December 2019, online. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-12-31-revealed-britain-rebuffed-nelson-mandelas-appeal-for-oil-sanctions-against-nigeria-after-it-executed-environmentalists/>. Accessed on 6 January 2020