



In fact, more oil is spilled from the delta's network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms every year than has been lost in the Gulf of Mexico, the site of a major ecological catastrophe caused by oil that has poured from a leak triggered by the explosion that wrecked BP's Deepwater Horizon rig last month.

That disaster, which claimed the lives of 11 rig workers, has made headlines round the world. By contrast, little information has emerged about the damage inflicted on the Niger delta. Yet the destruction there provides us with a far more accurate picture of the price we have to pay for drilling oil today.

On 1 May this year a ruptured ExxonMobil pipeline in the state of Akwa Ibom spilled more than a million gallons into the delta over seven days before the leak was stopped. Local people demonstrated against the company but say they were attacked by security guards. Community leaders are now demanding \$1bn in compensation for the illness and loss of livelihood they suffered. Few expect they will succeed. In the meantime, thick balls of tar are being washed up along the coast.

Within days of the Ibeno spill, thousands of barrels of oil were spilled when the nearby Shell Trans Niger pipeline was attacked by rebels. A few days after that, a large oil slick was found floating on Lake Adibawa in Bayelsa state and another in Ogoniland. "We are faced with incessant oil spills from rusty pipes, some of which are 40 years old," said Bonny Otavie, a Bayelsa MP.

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