

Danger Signs in Nigeria

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Editorial

Mayhem in Nigeria, the fifth-largest oil supplier to the United States and Africa's most populous country, is escalating. Since mid-December, crime and violence have regularly shut down about 10 percent of the country's oil output. In the last week, production has been cut by nearly 20 percent — a shortfall of 455,000 barrels daily — amid kidnappings of foreign workers, arson against offshore oil installations, bombings of pipelines and lethal clashes between Muslims and Christians.

The economic impact of the loss of Nigerian oil is magnified by other circumstances: the worsening of Iraq's oil industry, the nuclear impasse with Iran, heightening tension with Venezuela and last week's attempted suicide bombings at the main oil processing center in Saudi Arabia. The price of a barrel of crude oil spiked on Friday to nearly \$63 and is unlikely to ease soon.

But the world needs a stable Nigeria for reasons that go beyond oil. Nigeria is crucial to all of West Africa, having often provided the military troops and negotiating forums to quell civil war and related violence in neighboring countries. Nigeria is also important to counterterrorism efforts, both as it tries to monitor and defuse an encroaching fundamentalism among its own Muslims and in cooperating with international efforts to secure the strategically vital Gulf of Guinea. Nigeria is also now on the front lines of combating bird flu.

Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to Nigeria's troubles. A big part of the problem is that the people of the country's oil-rich Niger Delta remain deeply impoverished, largely because of endemic corruption in distributing oil wealth and the historical indifference of oil companies to those economic inequities and to environmental devastation in the Delta. At the same time, the militants who claim to represent the Delta people have evolved into criminal gangs, adept at stealing huge amounts of oil to sell on black markets, the proceeds of which are used to buy ever more sophisticated weapons.

Some of the current violence is a backlash against the Nigerian government's recent anti-corruption successes. But over all, Nigeria is not strong enough to solve its own problems. The Bush administration, with its good relations with Nigeria and with oil companies, is unusually well positioned to broker international arrangements that would enhance transparency in the flow of oil dollars and development in the Niger Delta.

Sub-Saharan Africa is on track to double its oil production in the next 10 years, when it will likely supply up to one-fourth of America's imported oil, much of it from Nigeria. Now is the time for the American government to pay more attention to this region.

