

# Oil is not Well

by Brian Bard

Eight years into a war against Iraq it makes sense to ask what it's all about. The incalculable human and environmental costs of the bombings and embargo have included at least 1.5 million people killed and left 600 tons of radioactive material spread throughout Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. What is the interest, which, in Madeline Albright's words, makes such devastation "worth it"?

A "senior American official"—most likely Secretary of State James Baker—told the *New York Times* within days of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in August of 1990: "We are talking about oil. Got it? Oil, vital American interests." If oil is the reason for the policy of the destruction of Iraq, we might do well to focus on what oil does for us and the world.

The black liquid plays a prominent part throughout the last hundred years of the racist-capitalist assault on the planet. The history of the oil industry is rife with the worst elements of capitalism. The collusion of the rich and powerful, the ripping, exploitative impulse, the routine abuse and destruction of anyone and anything that stands in its way, and a profound disregard for the earth are its legacy. As with the devastation corporate America is wreaking in Iraq, the tremendous cost in human life and environmental damage the oil industry creates is "acceptable" and "necessary to the American Way of Life."

## Pollution

The United States consumes far more energy per capita than any other nation. Our transportation system, which is totally dependent upon oil, accounts for two-thirds of U.S. oil consumption, and 36.5 percent of the country's overall energy consumption. The military takes the next most sizable chunk.

The corporate lobby vigorously fights any attempts made to reduce this dependency. Since 1985, not only has the automobile industry made have no improvements in gasoline consumption, fuel efficiency is getting even worse. Welcome to the SUV (Sports Utility Vehicle) revolution.

Transportation, in turn, contributes over

half of the air pollution in the US. In urban areas like Los Angeles, it generates 70-80%. The major air pollutant, carbon dioxide, produces lung irritation, decreased mental and physical dexterity, and other human health problems. It contributes to forest and crop damage and is the number one greenhouse gas. Because 81% of released carbon dioxide comes from oil, scientists estimate oil consumption to contribute more than 75% of enhanced global warming over the next century.

Then there is the contamination by oil of life's own fluid, water. Beginning with exploration and extraction and never really ending, most of this pollution is non-accidental—another "acceptable" devastation. Some of the amounts and sources of oil entering the water supply include: off-shore drilling operations (15 million gallons), routine ship operations (137 million gallons), used/waste engine oil (363 million gallons), air pollution which returns as particles (92 million gallons).

And then there is the accidental pollution. On average about 11 million gallons are spilled in the US each year (37 million worldwide) while improper disposal and storage of oil is estimated to allow the leakage of 20 million gallons into water sources in the US alone. A single gallon of oil can contaminate a million gallons of water with effects on animals ranging from suffocation to birth defects.

This is just a sampling of the environmental degradation wrought by oil, far from a complete list, and not even approaching the likely vaster impact of plastics and other petrochemicals. And, of course,

## Human Rights

Environmental damage impacts most heavily on non-White and poor populations, that is, those outside the ruling caste. But it's "worth it," because it supports "our way of life."

Oil is often discovered and drilled in especially environmentally delicate areas. While the animal and plant life in these places cannot fight back the people can and do.

In Ecuador, for example, Texaco continues to operate with antiquated and environmentally harsh, but cheap, methods, which release

some 10,000 gallons a day of contaminated water into the wetlands where it drills. Near the drilling operations, a visitor can observe indigenous children bathing themselves in a river, many with the pockmarks of pre-cancerous sores on their bodies.

For seven years now the local people have been fighting this attack by demanding a trial of Texaco in US courts. Texaco responds by claiming it should not be held accountable in the country where it administers its operations and holds its profit. The corporation seems to insist on a system where the vicious destruction of peoples and lands to profit a few is acceptable and immune from prosecution.

Chevron is another US corporation with a questionable record on the environment and human rights. Around its operations in the Niger Delta, one of the world's largest wetlands, activists have long called for more environmentally sound methods of extraction. They would also like to see some small percentage of the profits stay in the region where they are created.

The impetus and assistance which Chevron and other oil companies, notably Shell, give the Nigerian government in the repression of such activists has long been implicit. Recently, however, Chevron made this relationship quite explicit. Last fall, Chevron's PR officer in Nigeria, Sola Omole, admitted on tape to Pacifica Radio that on May 28, 1998 Chevron flew the military and police to the Parabe platform where they killed two peaceful protestors and seriously injured another.

Chevron helps the Nigerian government, the Nigerian government helps Chevron, innocent Nigerian people die, and the US enjoys a stable oil supply. But not all US citizens accept this arrangement. Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) has written a strongly worded letter to Congressman Benjamin Gilman co-signed by Reps. Donald Payne (D-NJ), Maxine Waters (D-CA) and Cynthia McKinney (D-GA) urging him to initiate a congressional investigation "into the allegation of killings of innocent civilians, human rights abuses, and harassment of environmental activists by the Nigerian security forces in collaboration with U.S. multinational oil corporations in the Niger Delta."

In Indonesia Mobil also seems to have worked quite closely with the forces of repression—both figuratively and literally. In the early 1990's Mobil advisors were routinely present at the P.T. Arun liquefied natural gas plant (35% owned by Mobil, 55% by

Indonesia). Teungku Bintara, then headman of a nearby village, claims that within yards of these happy capitalists, an Indonesian army officer interrogated him while whipping his scalp with a frayed cable and holding live electric wires to his genitals and temples.

Indonesian human rights groups have released reports which identify the Rancong prison camp where Bintara was held as a torture site and holds P.T. Arun and Mobil responsible for copious human rights abuses. The report alleges that Mobil provided logistical support to the army including earth-moving equipment used to dig mass graves; one such grave contained at least a dozen bodies. The area of Mobil's operations in the Aceh region of Indonesia is strewn with mutilated bodies, which are often reported to superiors by the workers who encountered them, but are somehow never cause for concern to headquarters.

## Stop the Terror

For the sake of the US interest in multinational corporate dominance of oil, then, the assault on nature and humanity is perpetuated and intensified. Nowhere is this any more clear than in Iraq where the bombing and embargo have wrought such unfathomable human and environmental devastation.

From the intentional bombing and ignition of oil wells to the use of depleted uranium, the US clearly demonstrated that it accepted the environment as just another incidental casualty. At the same time the denial of food and medicine to an Arab nation bears the familiar markings of racist violence. The use of such violence is not new for US policymakers. The country has already witnessed the genocide on Native Americans, slavery, and the disproportionate exploitation and incarceration of racially marked minority groups.

Even as we may abhor the US government which carries out these atrocities, it remains the one grand institution of modern corporate capitalism in which every US citizen has at least a nominal voice. We must use every privilege afforded by our citizenship to stop the terror directed at Iraq.

For thousands of years before the modern corporate capitalist blight, oil served as a sacred, healing fluid wherever it came to the surface. Perhaps as more and more diverse groups and individuals come together to end the bombing and embargo of Iraq, oil will again play this role.