

Enviro Justice Victory

IN WHAT ACTIVISTS CALL A MAJOR BLOW against environmental racism, the Japanese company Shintech announced in September that it is abandoning plans to build a vinyl production plant in Convent, Louisiana.

Convent is a mostly African-American populated town.

National environmental groups joined with Convent residents in opposing Shintech's plans to locate the largest polyvinyl chloride factory in the world in a poor, African-American community. They charged that the location of a dangerous and heavily polluting vinyl factory was part of a broader pattern by the chemical industry to locate hazardous facilities in minority areas, and constituted environmental racism.

The Shintech controversy helped crystalize the environmental racism issue, with the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Civil Rights launching an investigation into environmental racism and civil rights charges made in connection with the plant siting decision.

Shintech now appears to be planning to build a smaller factory in Plaquemine, Louisiana, near a Dow Chemical facility. Activist vow to oppose those plans.

"This fight is far from over," say Imelda West and Pat Melancon, two leaders of a Convent-area organization, St. James Citizens for Jobs and the Environment, in a formal statement. "We are being cautious about the details of this announcement and want to make clear that we will work with the people of Plaquemine to stop Shintech."

"This is an obvious face-saving move by a player in a dirty industry that is becoming more dead-end by the day," says Damu Smith, a toxics specialist with Greenpeace, which is advocating for a phase-out of PVCs. "We demand that Shintech cancel its plans to expand its PVC production operations."

Chevron Condemned

CCHEVRON IS IMPLICATED in the killing of two Nigerian activists earlier this year, according to a report aired in September on Pacifica Radio.

The San Francisco-based multinational oil company helped facilitate an attack by the Nigerian Navy and Mobile Police (MOPOL) on protesters who had taken over an oil platform and barge, charges reporter Amy Goodman of Pacifica's "Democracy Now."

In an interview with Goodman, a Chevron official acknowledged that on May 28, 1998, the company transported Nigerian soldiers to the company's Parabe oil platform and barge in the Niger Delta, which dozens of community activists had occupied. The protesters were demanding that Chevron contribute more to the development of the impoverished oil region where they live.

In the interview with Goodman, Chevron spokesperson Sola Omole was asked about the operation.

Q: Who took them in, on Thursday morning, the

Mobile Police, the Navy?

A: We did. We did. Chevron did. We took them there.

Q: By how?

A: Helicopters, yes, we took them in.

Q: Who authorized the call for the military to come in?

A: That's Chevron's management.

In San Francisco, Chevron spokesperson Mike Libbey says that Chevron did transport Nigerian soldiers, but only after Nigerian law enforcement officials "directed the company to do so." He adds, "I suspect that we would do the same thing if the U.S. government authorized us to take [military personnel] to a U.S. platform."

"It's a complete distortion to imply from this that we were complicit" in the deaths of the protesters, he says.

But Goodman says that Chevron "facilitated the attack."

"The Mobile Police, the Navy — they are feared throughout Nigeria. They fire first," Goodman says. The Mobile Police are known throughout the country as the "kill and go," she says.

Chevron says that the two protesters were shot when they tried to disarm the soldiers. But the surviving protesters say that soon after landing in Chevron-leased helicopters, the Nigerian military shot to death the two protesters, Jola Ogungbeje and Aroleka Irowaninu, and wounded several others. Eleven other activists were detained for three weeks.

The government owns 60 percent of the oil operation, while Chevron holds a 40 percent stake.

A Community Right To Act

IN RESPONSE TO A TOXIC RELEASE from a chemical plant that sent school students to hospitals, the Passaic County, New Jersey governing body, called the Board of Chosen Freeholders, in September unanimously enacted the nation's first neighborhood "right to act" law to prevent environmental hazards.

The law allows neighbors and/or employees to petition the county Health Officer for creation of Neighborhood Hazard Prevention Advisory Committees (NHPACs) for specific facilities. NHPACs could include management and employees, neighbors, and a municipal representative. They would meet to discuss potential hazards and would make recommendations to corporate management. The precedent-setting law gives NHPACs authority to do on-site surveys, accompanied by independent experts.

"We got tired of swat teams descending on toxic crime scenes after exposures, injuries, or deaths," says Deputy Director Freeholder Lois Cuccinello. "That is why we enacted this law — to prevent dangers in the first place."

The Freeholders passed the resolution following three toxic releases in the city of Paterson since June..

Passaic County is the fifth most densely populated county in New Jersey and has 484,000 residents. ■