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Lagos, Nigeria

PRESS RELEASE: CALL FOR FRIVOLOUS CHARGES TO BE DROPPED AGAINST COMMUNITY ADVOCATE



Justice & Empowerment Initiatives – Nigeria (JEI) urgently calls for the Nigerian Police Force to drop frivolous charges against community advocate, Mr. Onoriobe Raymond Gold, for his lawful and courageous work on behalf of his community and others affected by the nearby activities of Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd.

In early February 2016, the Irede Community Developers Association Lagos, with support from the Irede community baale and the traditional land-owning Onisiwo family, raised an alarm about a dredging project being carried out by Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd next to Irede community, which is located on the Onisiwo Islands opposite Creek Road, Apapa Wharf.

The concerns were based on the rapid erosion of the community's shoreline that was causing cracking in some of the houses and other cement structures nearby. The Association, chaired by Mr. Onoriobe Raymond Gold, wrote to the company in question and also to the Lagos State Ministry of Waterfront to enquire as to whether the dredging activities were properly licensed and whether any environmental impact assessment (EIA) had been conducted. At the same time, looking at the company's long-term intentions, the Association wrote to the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) about the process for siting of a refinery next to their community.

When the Lagos State Ministry of Waterfront came to Irede community in response to the letter, the representative confirmed that they had no record of a license being given to Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd for its dredging activities near the community. A award-winning radio journalist who has been investigating instances of illegal dredging in Lagos State, also investigated and reported on the story, including getting confirmation from the Federal Ministry of Environment that there was no EIA – which is required by federal law – on file for the dredging activities near Irede.

In the course of their investigations, journalists who contacted the head of Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd, Captain Emmanuel Ihenacho, for comment were instead threatened and intimidated.

Less than two weeks after taking these lawful and conscientious steps in support of his community, Mr. Onoriobe Raymond Gold was invited by the Area L Command of the Nigerian Police Force. They honored this invitation on 22 February 2016. At the Area Command, Mr. Raymond Gold was asked to make statement without being shown the full petition against him. He was then denied his right to counsel when being taken into a meeting with the Area L Commander and the CSO of Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd. The meeting reportedly broke down with the company's CSO made threats against Mr. Gold that if he wanted to ruin the company, they would "deal with him" – threats which the Area Commander refused to censure. The police then proceeded for investigation in Irede community, using a company bus and speedboat and reportedly enjoying other logistical support provided by Integrated Oil & Gas Ltd.

Unsurprisingly in light of the evident bias in and influence that is likely fueling the police investigation, Mr. Gold was refused police bail on 22 February 2016. On 23 February 2016, he was charged to court on highly frivolous charges, including conduct “likely to cause breach of the peace,” “conspiracy to extort,” and “threat of violence.” Against the background of the last few weeks, these charges can only be understood as an attempt to silence Mr. Gold’s lawful inquiries in the activities of the company in question and his advocacy on behalf of his community.

JEI is highly concerned about such frivolous prosecution of a law-abiding community advocate who has courageously taken steps to defend the rights of his and other host communities, and to ensure that the company whose activities affect his community follows the law of the land. We hereby call for the frivolous charges against Mr. Raymond Gold to be dropped immediately and for the Nigerian Police Force to look into the influence fueling his investigation and prosecution.

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