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Leslye Wood: 206-915-4339
media@sweetcrudemovie.com
www.sweetcrudemovie.com

Available for interviews:

Filmmaker Sandy Cioffi: 206-612-0684

Niger Delta Conflict Management & Community Development Expert Joel Bisina: 571-213-4310

U.S. Senator Russ Feingold issues statement on Niger Delta crisis and current attacks by Nigerian Military

May 22, 2009, Seattle – U.S. Senator Russ Feingold today issued a statement on the nine-day, continuing Nigerian military offensive in the Niger Delta. Feingold expressed concern about civilian casualties and refugees, and called on the Nigerian government to address underlying causes of the crisis in the region. He also urged the Obama administration to enjoin a multilateral effort to help end the crisis. Feingold is a member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

The attacks by the Joint Task Force (JTF) of the Nigerian military began May 13th. Unconfirmed reports put civilian casualty figures as high as 2,000 and the number of refugees as high as 20,000. It's reported that at least five villages have been razed by the JTF. At last report, the region was blockaded by the Nigerian military and aid workers were unable to get food, water and medical assistance to the injured and displaced, many of whom have fled into the bush. Journalists and human rights groups have also been barred.

“We applaud Senator Feingold’s statement. It’s critical that high profile people speak out in this moment calling for an end to the violence and highlighting the tragic toll on civilians,” says Sandy Cioffi, filmmaker and director of Sweet Crude, a documentary about the Niger Delta currently screening at film festivals. “I am heartened by his understanding of what it will take to achieve peace in the region and encourage the U.S.

government to get involved as he urges. I believe that can be very influential. The region is on the brink – we must pay attention before it devolves into full-scale war.”

“The military attacks in the Niger Delta are a tragedy for local villagers that is becoming a humanitarian crisis,” says Laura Livoti, founder of Justice in Nigeria Now (JINN). “I hope more U.S. officials will take the lead from Senator Feingold and work toward a negotiated peace settlement between all parties in Nigeria that promotes justice in the region. The United States is heavily dependent on Nigerian oil for its own energy needs, and a resolution to this crisis is in the long-term interest of the United States as well.”

Please see below:

Senator Feingold’s statement May 22

Amnesty International’s statement May 21

More information at www.sweetcrudemovie.com/attacks

For Immediate Release – May 22, 2009

Contact: Zach Lowe or Katie Rowley – (202) 224-8657

Statement of U.S. Senator Russ Feingold

On the Nigerian military's ongoing offensive in the Niger Delta

“I am very concerned by reports that hundreds of civilians have been killed and potentially thousands displaced by the Nigerian military’s ongoing offensive in Nigeria’s oil-rich Delta region. Some military actions may be justified to stop the criminality, kidnappings and killings by militants in the Niger Delta, but such measures should be accompanied by a larger political strategy. Genuine peacemaking will require not only legitimate political negotiations but a convincing case for transforming the illicit war economy into one of peace. The Nigerian government needs to undertake a serious and sustained initiative to address the underdevelopment of the region. I urge the Obama administration to think creatively about how we can work multilaterally to help end this long-standing crisis in the Niger Delta.”

Statement by Amnesty International

Tens of thousands caught in crossfire in Niger Delta fighting

21 May 2009

20,000 people who live in Warri South and southwest local government area, in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, are caught in cross fire between the Joint Task Force (JTF) and armed groups. Thousands have fled their communities and are unable to return to their homes.

The JTF offensive began on 13 May after the JTF was reported to have been attacked by armed groups in Delta State. The JTF have been conducting land and air strikes on communities across the Warri south and south-west local government areas where the Nigerian government believes the camps of the armed groups are located. Hundreds of people are feared dead.

The JTF attacked several communities of the Gbaramatu Kingdom, including Okerenkoko and Oporoza, using helicopters equipped with machine guns on 15 May. Around 500 people had gathered in Oporoza for a yearly festival that was being celebrated in several communities of the Gbaramatu Kingdom.

An eyewitness who attended the festival said: "I heard the sound of aircraft; I saw two military helicopters, shooting at the houses, at the palace, shooting at us. We had to run for safety into the forest. In the bush, I heard adults crying, so many mothers could not find their children; everybody ran for their life."

The JTF is composed of troops of the army, navy, air force and the mobile police, and was set up in 2004 to restore order in the Niger Delta. The JTF attacks on the communities in the area are continuing on a daily basis, reportedly because they believe the armed groups are hiding in the communities.

Exact casualty figures following the attacks are as yet unknown. According to reports received by Amnesty International, hundreds of bystanders, including women and children, are believed to have been killed and injured by the JTF and by the armed groups shooting at the JTF.

Many houses in the communities have been set on fire and destroyed by the military. People are still in hiding in the forest, with no access to medical care and food. The main method of transportation for these communities is by boat. However, according to reports, people attempting to travel by water are being targeted by the JTF or members of the armed groups.

"The JTF and armed groups should not use force in a way that results in human right abuses, they should not forcibly displace people, and they must ensure free access to those in need of medical care," said Amnesty International's Vernoique Aubert.

Poverty, corruption and the presence of oil, arms and gangs, have made the Niger Delta a very volatile region. In the past years, armed groups and criminal gangs have explicitly sought to control resources, and have engaged in acts of violence. This has led to an increase in violent confrontations between the armed groups and the JTF.

The JTF has been frequently accused of using excessive force when attacking armed groups and gangs and often bystanders from local communities were injured and killed. In August 2008, following an attack on the JTF by armed groups, at least 4 people were killed when the military raided the village of Agge, Bayelsa State.

In August 2007, the JTF intervened in a clash between two rival gangs in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, using helicopters and machine-guns and killing at least 32 gang members, members of the security forces and bystanders.

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