

The secret US embassy files

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Cables reveal Shell's grip on Nigerian state

Oil firm executive boasts it has staff placed in 'every relevant ministry'

David Smith Lagos

The oil giant Shell claimed it had inserted staff into all the main ministries of the Nigerian government, giving it access to politicians' every move in the oil-rich Niger Delta, according to a leaked US diplomatic cable.

The company's top executive in Nigeria told US diplomats that Shell had seconded employees to every relevant department and so knew "everything that was being done in those ministries". She boasted that the Nigerian government had "forgotten" about the extent of Shell's infiltration and were unaware of how much the company knew about its deliberations.

The cache of secret dispatches from Washington's embassies in Africa also revealed that the Anglo-Dutch oil firm swapped intelligence with the US, in

that saw hackers sympathetic to Wiki-Leaks target MasterCard and Visa over their decision to block payments to the whistleblowers' website.

The website's founder, Julian Assange, spent a second night in jail after a judge refused him bail prior to an extradition hearing to face questioning over sexual assault charges in Sweden.

Campaigners last night said the revelation about Shell in Nigeria demonstrated the tangled links between the oil firm and politicians in the country where, despite billions of dollars in oil revenue, 70% of people live below the poverty line.

Cables from Nigeria show how Ann Pickard, then Shell's vice-president for sub-Saharan Africa, sought to share intelligence with the US government on militant activity and business competition in the contested Niger Delta - and how, with some prescience, she seemed reluctant to open up because of a suspicion the US government was "leaky".

But that did not prevent Pickard disclosing the company's reach into the Nigerian government when she met US ambassador Robin Renee Sanders, as recorded in a confidential memo from the US embassy in Abuja on 20 October 2009.

At the meeting, Pickard related how the company had obtained a letter showing that the Nigerian government had invited bids for oil concessions from China. She said the minister of state for petroleum resources, Odein Ajumogobia, had denied the letter had been sent but Shell knew similar correspondence had taken place with China and Russia.

The ambassador reported: "She said the GON [government of Nigeria] had forgotten that Shell had seconded people to all the relevant ministries and that Shell consequently had access to everything that was being done in those ministries."

Nigeria is Africa's leading oil producer and the eighth biggest exporter in the world, accounting for 8% of US oil imports. Although a recent UN

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Civil servants told US to ignore Brown statement on reducing Trident fleet

David Leigh

Two senior Whitehall officials as diplomats that the renewal of Trident nuclear deterrent would, apparently contradicting then prime minister Gordon Brown's public statement proposing some disarmament according to leaked US embassy

The London embassy sent a se back to Washington last autumn ing conversations with the two o ants, Richard Freer and Judith C which they cast doubt on the sig of Brown's announcement at the eral assembly that Britain might number of planned new Trident rines from four to three.

It is not clear from the cables the Britons were speaking on authority. In the dispatches, US officials describe them as "HMG esty's Government] sources" a that their identities should be p

Freer is one of Whitehall's mos tial officials and a member of Da eron's small team of private secr Downning Street.

According to the leaked ca anxiety about the future of Brit dent missiles followed Brown' at the UN in September 2009 nuclear disarmament.

In London, Freer and Gough Americans that Brown's words a surprise to them because the actual change of British nucle under way. There would contin "no daylight" between the US an on the existing £20bn Trident rep scheme, the Americans were ass

One US dispatch, classified "no form", meaning only for US e "[Brown's] announcement of a fleet reduction caught many in FCO and Cabinet Office by surp

It continued: "Dr Richard Freer (protect) head of defence and policy ... told Poloff [political September 23 that 'in an ideal w have done a bit more pre-vettin speech]'. One of Freer's Cabin deputies was blunter, telling P the announcement was 'unexp

"Both Freer and Judith Gough (protect), deputy head of the policy group at the Foreign a monwealth Office, stressed that HMG has not formally to scale back the deterrent b only do so if a government review determines, in Freer' that it would be 'technically fe maintain 'continuous deterrence with three submarines ...

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HMS Vengeance, one of four Vanguard class boats with Trident nuclear missiles. The US feared it might not be renewed Photograph: Graeme Hart/Perthshire Picture

On defining day for tuition fees, more mass action planned

Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt

In what is set to be a defining day for English universities and politics, most Liberal Democrat MPs are expected today to join their party leader, Nick Clegg, to force through a trebling of university tuition fees, in the face of what are likely to be angry student street protests and bitter recriminations at Westminster.

at one point demanded the energy secretary, Chris Huhne, make the 5,000-mile trip home from the climate change summit in Cancún, Mexico, to vote. Later, it emerged he would stay at the summit.

In a further sign of the stresses, Simon Hughes, the party's deputy leader, told his local party he would be abstaining from the vote at the end of this evening's five-hour debate. Hughes made his decision

despite playing a prominent role in winning three last-minute concessions from the business department covering scholarships, part-time students and the £21,000 repayment threshold.

Other Liberal Democrat ministers, such as the schools secretary, Sarah Teather, found themselves hounded by TV cameras as they left their homes, refusing to answer reporters' questions.

Clegg has ensured that all 17 Liberal

pledge and vote against, including two former leaders, Charles Kennedy and Sir Menzies Campbell.

Conservative and Labour whips expect an overall majority of about 30 for the increase, but it has become the first serious test of the coalition's coherence since the election in May.

In a media blitz, Clegg accepted that, before the election, he had pledged to get rid of tuition fees over two parliaments,

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Cables reveal Shell's grip on Nigerian state

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report largely exonerated the company, critics accuse Shell, the biggest operator in the delta, and other companies, of causing widespread pollution and environmental damage in the region. Militant groups engaged in hostage-taking and sabotage have proliferated.

The WikiLeaks disclosure was yesterday seized on by campaigners as evidence of Shell's vice-like grip on the country's oil wealth. "Shell and the government of Nigeria are two sides of the same coin," said Celestine AkpoBari, programme officer for Social Action Nigeria.

"Shell is everywhere. They have an eye and an ear in every ministry of Nigeria. They have people on the payroll in every community, which is why they get away with everything. They are more powerful than the Nigerian government."

The criticism was echoed by Ben Amunwa of the London-based oil watchdog Platform. "Shell claims to have nothing to do with Nigerian politics," he said. "In reality, Shell works deep inside the system, and has long exploited political channels in Nigeria to its own advantage."

Nigeria last night strenuously denied the claim. Levi Ajuonoma, a spokesman for the state-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, said: "Shell does not control the government of Nigeria and has never controlled the government of Nigeria. This cable is the mere interpretation of one individual. It is absolutely untrue, an absolute falsehood and utterly misleading. It is an attempt to demean the government and we will not stand for that. I don't think anybody will lose sleep over it."

Another cable released yesterday, from the US consulate in Lagos and dated 19 September 2008, claims that Pickard told US diplomats that two named regional politicians were behind unrest in the Rivers state. She also asked if the American

diplomats had any intelligence on shipments of surface to air missiles (SAMs) to militants in the Niger Delta.

"She claimed Shell has 'intelligence' that one to three SAMs may have been shipped to Nigerian militant groups, although she seemed somewhat sceptical of that information and wondered if such sensitive systems would last long in the harsh environment of the Niger Delta," the cable said.

Pickard also said Shell had learned from the British government details of Russian energy company Gazprom's ambitions to enter the Nigerian market. In June last year, Gazprom signed a \$2.5bn (£1.5bn) deal with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation to build refineries, pipelines and gas power stations.

Shell put a request to the US consulate for potentially sensitive intelligence about its possible rival, which she said had secured a promise from the Nigerian government of access to 17 trillion cubic feet of natural gas - roughly a tenth of Nigeria's entire reserves. "Pickard said that amount of gas was only available if the GON were to take concessions currently assigned to other oil companies and give them to Gazprom. She assumed Shell would be the GON's prime target." Pickard alleged that a

'Shell does not control Nigeria. This cable is absolutely untrue, an absolute falsehood'

conversation with a Nigerian government minister had been secretly recorded by the Russians. Shortly after the meeting in the minister's office she received a verbatim transcript of the meeting "from Russia", according to the memo.

The cable concludes with the observation that the oil executive had tended to be guarded in discussion with US officials. "Pickard has repeatedly told us she does not like to talk to USG [US government] officials because the USG is 'leaky'." She may be concerned that ... bad news about Shell's Nigerian operations will leak out."

Shell declined to comment on the allegations, saying: "You are seeking our views on a leaked cable allegedly containing information about a private conversation involving a Shell representative, but have declined to share this cable or to permit us sufficient time to obtain information from the person you say took part in the conversation on the part of Shell. In view of this, we cannot comment on the alleged contents of the cable, including the correctness or incorrectness of any statements you say it contains."



Pipelines carrying oil in Nigeria

Students plan more mass action today

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struggling to explain its policy because of the "scary" £9,000 upper limit on tuition fees. Asked on Radio 5 Live why he had been unable to explain why the new system would be fairer, the deputy prime minister said: "Partly because the figure which has, in a sense, been caught in the headlights is the £9,000 figure. In fact the £9,000 figure is only going to happen on an exceptional basis."

"Because that is such a simple, big, scary figure, no one perhaps is looking beyond that headline and asking what does it mean in terms of how you repay. In a sense that is relatively complex."

"We are needing a lot of time to explain over and over again what we are proposing, rather than what people are alleging we are proposing."

US was told to ignore Trident statement

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"Freer criticised media for exaggerating the significance of Brown's announcement, opining that it was 'not really a major disarmament announcement'."

The cable added: "Julian Miller, deputy head of the foreign and defence policy secretariat at the Cabinet Office assured the political minister council on September 24 that HMG would continue with the US regarding future developments concerning the Trident deterrent to assure there would be 'no daylight' between the US and UK."

A Foreign Office spokesman refused to say yesterday whether or not the two officials had authority to talk to the US.

US concern about the future of Trident had first surfaced a few weeks earlier, before Brown's speech to the House of Commons when British media carried unattributed political briefings which suggested Labour government intended to conduct a crucial Trident replacement decision.

The nuclear-armed French initiative was believed this news was significant, one French official telling the US: "This is starting to seem really convinced that disarmament is possible, since it is abandoning its Trident submarine-launched ballistic missile programme."

The French were so upset they protested to US diplomats that Labour ministers were acting like "demagogues". Broome said that nuclear weapons in general were immoral was, by implication, threatening "an essential part of French strategic identity", they complained. British servants said the hints of disarmament were confined to the Cabinet Office.

The US chargé d'affaires, Richard LeBaron, told Washington Gough also named the British official behind the off-the-record media briefings. "Julian Gough (protect) ... told Poloff July 2008 the unnamed official who had briefed the press was Simon McDonald, the net Office head of foreign and defence policy. She said that press reports that HMG plans to defer Trident replacement design work 'came as news' to FCDO MoD officers ..."

"Diana Venn (protect), an official at the Cabinet Office's foreign and defence policy secretariat, told Poloff July 2008 there had been a 'slight misunderstanding' when McDonald briefed the press. She stressed that 'Trident is not obsolete ... we won't disarm unilaterally'."

The new Conservative administration described as pro-Trident in the dispatch. "Conservative party defence sources have privately affirmed to embassy sources their commitment to the Trident deterrent," diplomats cabled before the general election.

The Conservative government's current public position is that a Trident replacement decision is being deferred for several years, past the next general election.

Trident missiles are leased from the US. The cables detail how Britain's nuclear warheads, which carry the missiles, depend on "substantial American design assistance".

were thinking of rebelling because of their unease about the coalition. It isn't about tuition fees. It is about politicians saying one thing to get elected and a different thing when they are in government ... I am a Conservative, I am a coalitionist."

And a group of university vice-chancellors published a letter last night arguing that the cost of the student loan scheme was so expensive that there would be net savings to the exchequer.

There were calls for the police to handle today's protests - which are expected to see tens of thousands of demonstrators target Westminster - to be restrained. Last night, 28 signatories, including MPs, students, journalists and an MP, signed a letter urging the government to respond to tomorrow's protest in a peaceful manner.

The Labour MP Jon Cruddas, the Labour MP and musician Billy Bragg, the NUJ general secretary, Aaron Porter, and about a dozen groups of students who are occupying their universities signed the letter, said that protesters had resorted to direct action after being "comprehensively rebuffed" by the parliamentary process. It added: "Following the emergence of the coalition government, we

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