

Statement

From the crew of *Sweet Crude* after release from Nigerian SSS Detention

Sunday, April 20, 2008

We want to begin with the most important message, which is our deep gratitude for all of the support, tireless work and commitment to securing our release from the Nigerian State Security Services. We would like to specifically thank Senators Maria Cantwell and Jon Tester for their immediate and swift action on our behalf. We would also like to express our thanks to the additional Senators and Representatives who signed and delivered a letter to Nigerian President Yar'Adua. We have been informed that this level of Congressional support is unprecedented. We would like to acknowledge the US Ambassador to Nigeria, Robin Sanders, who courageously advocated for our release with the highest security authorities in Nigeria. We commend the staff of the US Consular Division in Abuja for their vigilant work to secure what was by Nigerian terms a swift release. In particular, we are grateful to Victoria Coffineau who was our lifeline during our detention. And most specifically, we want to acknowledge our friends and family for their relentless pursuit of justice on our behalf. It is impossible for us, at this early stage of homecoming, to even begin to grasp the reach and depth of support we've received. During the most difficult hours of detention, we knew you were feverishly doing all you could to bring us home and it literally carried us through the ordeal. To all of you, we can only say the most sincere thank you.

It is important to us that you know you extended your influence, support and reputations for people who, contrary to reports from the Nigerian Government, were doing work in the Niger Delta lawfully, responsibly, honorably and with all proper permission and advanced notification to all authorities necessary. The Nigerian Government has continued to claim that we were in a location that required advanced authorization and permitting, and we are aware that one report claimed we did not even secure visas prior to our arrival. This is entirely false.

The facts are as follows: We have been working in and out of the Niger Delta since November of 2005 openly, with a very careful commitment to knowing who's who and what's what in the complex world of that region. We entered the country with business visas and letters of invitation stating explicitly that we would be filming to complete *Sweet Crude*. Nigerian law, prior to our detention, did not state that special permits were needed for any travel within the country. This is an excuse used after the fact to disguise the intentional

systematic and dangerous suppression of journalism in the Niger Delta. Moreover, we know that if we had applied to the Nigerian military forces deployed in the Delta, known as the Joint Task Force or JTF, with a complete itinerary including our every location, it could have put us at further risk rather than secured our safety.

It is important to understand that it is known that some soldiers in the JTF are corrupt; and are, in fact, themselves involved in oil bunkering and ransom deals for hostages – abusing their power to play both of sides of the fence. As responsible journalists, we have developed relationships with locals in the communities where we have been filming. In a place like the Niger Delta, with the stakes so high, the players so numerous and loyalties so difficult to discern, it is imperative that the work be done to learn who can be trusted. At the time we were intercepted by the JTF, we were traveling with our dear colleague, Nigerian-American, Joel Bisina, to his childhood village in Egbema. Joel has been clear with us that traveling to local villages with members of the JTF is neither wise nor safe. To do so could place the people living in those communities at risk, hinder people's trust and willingness to work with us and place ourselves in the hands of the entity most interested in preventing us from telling the world the true story of what is occurring in an area producing more of U.S. oil than Iraq and Kuwait combined. The U.S. gets anywhere from 10% to 19% of our oil from Nigeria, which is, at times, more of the U.S. supply than the oil from Saudi Arabia.

At 9:00 am on Saturday, April 12th, our crew was together in a boat with our camera bags zipped and packed away. Even though military rule officially ended in Nigeria in 1999, the Niger Delta, for all intents and purposes, continues to be an occupied land. We approached a JTF checkpoint and were instructed to pull over. The exchange that ensued between the officer on duty and Joel began as routine harassment of a local Nigerian man who knew all too well that he was implicitly being asked for money. Joel had had enough and decided not to capitulate. He voiced his right to escort his four colleagues to complete filming for a documentary and to meet his mother. He argued with the officer, reminding him that he had every right to lawfully travel to his childhood village. In response, the JTF officer ordered all of us out of the boat. We were taken to the Commanding Officer's headquarters. From this point, the situation continued to escalate and eventually turned from being routine harassment by a JTF officer to an illegal detainment that lasted seven days.

Our interaction with the JTF regarding our detainment was a series of shifting excuses used to justify continuing to hold us. Initially we were told that we were being held for our own safety. The implication was made that perhaps Joel was kidnapping us. Furthermore, even if we weren't being kidnapped, the JTF had a duty to stop us from going to a dangerous place. Both excuses were fully disingenuous; and, in fact, at no time in our detainment did any officer ask us if we felt unsafe or were being held hostage. When we pushed this issue, we were told that the only way we would be allowed to continue our trip was if we paid the JTF a fee to escort us.

When the excuse of holding us for our safety wore thin, we were told that we had been stopped because our boat did not contain life jackets. This excuse is more than laughable. In fact, during our four trips to the Niger Delta, there has been no indication of a law requiring life jackets for boat travel in the Niger Delta. And in fact, we have traveled in numerous public and chartered boats and have only had life jackets during one trip.

At 2:00 pm on Saturday, April 12th, after hours of negotiation with the JTF, our bags were searched. Immediately upon seeing cameras, superior officers were summoned to escalate the case. It was at this time that the reason for detaining us turned to an accusation of being in the country without proper paperwork and permission, even though we had already presented our passports and Nigerian Business Visas to them. Within the next two hours, the five of us were being driven to an army base in Warri. At this time, we overheard that there would be an arrest number and a charge of sabotage.

Fortunately, our cell phones had not been confiscated yet and a member of our crew was able to send in-depth text messages about our situation. At about 4:00 pm, we were informed we would be taken to Abuja and our cell phones were confiscated. By getting the word out early, our incredible team in the U.S. was able to put a series of steps in motion that saved us. We were never told why we were being arrested or what we were being charged with. In fact, we were never given an answer in earnest to this question, or to why we were denied access to communication or attorneys. It is important to note that before we were moved from Warri, our team in the U.S. had been able to secure an attorney, Bello Bibobra Orubebe, to represent us. We only learned this much later, because when he arrived at the JTF headquarters, he was not allowed to speak with us and we were not informed of his presence. In addition, when the JTF suggested that we were being held because we did not have proper paperwork and permission to be on the waterways, we had additional visa application documentation

delivered to the headquarters only to have the JTF officers refuse to view the documents. Those documents would have clearly indicated our lawful entry into the country. Had the intent of our detainment really been to secure and review our paperwork, the issue could have and should have been cleared at that time before we were ever removed from Warri to Abuja.

Instead, the situation continued to escalate and upon our arrival in Abuja, one officer turned control of us over to another and we heard the words, “They are your prisoners now.” So then we knew that the excuses that had been given to us to justify our detainment were false and we knew for certain we were indeed prisoners.

It is clear to us now that the real issue was that we are journalists working to tell the story of the human and environmental rights violations in the Niger Delta. Our work is giving a voice to the people of the region who say it is their just right to have control over the way oil is produced and revenue distributed, and to have legitimate political representation. Sometimes, when journalists come to do this work, they are considered spies by the Nigerian government. All of this seems to be part of a pattern. Nigerian authorities have been harassing, detaining and arresting foreign and domestic journalists to send a message that no one should come to report about the Niger Delta.

Contrary to reports from the Nigerian government that we were flown to Abuja, we were not. Rather, we were driven in two trucks with six armed soldiers in each truck on a harrowing 8 ½ hour ride through the night with numerous check points. Ironically, one of the most stern warnings on the U.S. State Department website is not to drive at night in Nigeria. We now know why. For us, one of the saddest parts of this was the reckless danger that those young soldiers were placed in to accompany people who were to be illegally detained – people the JTF knew full well were not a security risk to their nation. In Abuja, the JTF turned us over to the SSS.

We want to explain in very brief detail the difficulty of being detained by the SSS in Nigeria. We are keenly aware that what we experienced is only a small taste of the brutality that has been leveled on Nigerians and other journalists who have come before us. The SSS and Nigerian government are known for fabricating evidence and misrepresenting facts. Our intent is to shed light on what a Nigerian man who apologized to us as we were leaving the country called “the last gasps of the dark days of a few men owning so much that they would do anything to keep people from talking about it.” He asked us to go home and tell you that it is

only with something like this incident that American attention can help to sway the Nigerian government toward due process and demilitarization.

From the moment we were made to relinquish our cell phones, we had no contact with the outside world for five full days, with the exception of two visits from the U.S. consular office. These visits were witnessed by the very SSS officers who were our jailers and interrogators. In other words, we could not be open with our only lifeline to the outside world. We had sporadic access to food and water, particularly worrisome for our team member Joel, who is diabetic and was denied access to his medication for over two days. We were held in spaces with various amounts of control over temperature, which varied from 60 to 100 degrees by our estimation. On the first day, after only two hours of sleep, we were woken and subjugated to four to eight hours of interrogation.

While we had different experiences, each of us was interrogated anywhere from one to four times, with anywhere from reasonable tactics to psychologically and borderline physically abusive tactics. We were subjected to low level ridicule, good cop/bad cop mind games and a stream of misinformation or no information intended to be maddening. While there are more details and personal difficulties in this process, we reiterate we are sadly aware that this is nothing in comparison to what others have gone through.

We were very aware as the days played out that it is only because of the tremendous pressure brought by all of you that we were released within one week rather than detained for much longer. They were extremely clear with us that they wanted to send a strong message. Given that you took a risk to support us personally, we would like to leverage that hard work to shed light on the principle for which you fought.

Sweet Crude director Sandy Cioffi has worked on several film projects related to civil rights, due process and illegal detentions. What were intellectual and philosophical commitments prior to this experience, have now become very personal. Being seized at gunpoint and detained is a terrifying experience. And even though we cannot imagine in precisely what ways, we know that this has materially changed us.

During the time we were detained and interrogated, the price of oil hit a record high. But it is only now, we feel, that each of us has actually paid the true price of oil. It seems this sort of denial of humanity is required to maintain power structures where violence, militarization, environmental devastation and corruption are tolerated as the downstream

consequences of our current oil consumption. This is it. Things have got to change. If our experiences can bring even the smallest improvement in the quality of life for the people who originally inspired this work, it will all have been worth it. Truly.

We don't want to see this episode end with the notion that the seemingly more valuable American lives were saved. This story is not about our detainment. We are home safely; but the human suffering we have witnessed in the Niger Delta that inspired us to risk being there is ongoing and widespread. We paid a small price for bringing cameras to a place that the powerful want to keep hidden. The people there are paying the high price for oil having been found under their feet. We are asking that you continue the work for the people left behind.

We hope that we do not see a new warning for Americans and journalists to stay away from the Niger Delta. We hope this catalyzes more pressure for international attention. For a call for binding talks between the Nigerian Government, militants, oil companies, NGOs, the military and all stakeholders in the region. Nigeria can be a triumph of preventive diplomacy. It can be a place where we work to turn the corner on the old ways of blatant exploitation for resources. The triumph cannot happen in a vacuum or without witnesses. That is why we went there to film a documentary. And that's why we are so grateful that the level of support for us reflects the commitment to telling this story at this time.

It would never be our wish for this case to worsen the relationship between the U.S. and Nigeria. We call on the Nigerian Government to stop arresting or detaining journalists, foreign and domestic. It is time to live up to the promise of a free and democratic Nigeria. We also want to be clear that what we experienced was brutal, yes. But it hasn't erased our memories of the Nigeria we had come to love before this. It is a beautiful country with many brave people trying to leave behind the old guard for good. We support that effort with all our hearts. Thank you.

Sandy Cioffi

Sean Porter

Tammi Sims

Cliff Worsham

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