

Not off our coast

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CITIZENS SAY NO TO OIL AND GAS DRILLING 'Not off our coast' Lyse Comins

KwaZulu-Natal residents and environmental groups united in vehement opposition against plans to explore and drill for oil and gas off the province's coast, highlighting devastating environmental disasters during oil and gas operations globally.

Sasol Africa is collaborating with Italian oil and gas corporation Eni to explore for oil and gas along the KwaZulu-Natal coast, hoping to locate massive oil and gas reserves under the seabed at depths of between 3 800m to 4 800m.

Environmental groups have questioned why Sasol has partnered with Eni, which is facing charges of bribery related to its 2011 joint purchase with Shell of Nigeria of an offshore oil field for \$1.3 billion in Nigeria. The oil field is one of the most valuable on the continent, but it has never entered production. Eni and Shell of Nigeria have both denied the allegations.

At a public meeting organised by the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance to meet with Sasol management yesterday in Wentworth, some 200 residents raised their objections, some angrily shouting "voetsek, Sasol, voetsek", and "we will never accept the oil industry".

It emerged at the meeting that a drilling platform, supported by six vessels, had been launched by a third-party company, PGS, that was already carrying out seismic surveys for the proposed operation. The platform and vessels were located on an online vessel tracing platform by a local fisherman, who highlighted this at the meeting.

Livelihoods Earthlife Africa chairperson Alice Thomson said environmental activists were concerned about the risk of a massive oil spill as had happened on a BP rig in the Gulf of Mexico, killing ten people, in 2010 that could cause loss of marine life and impact the livelihoods of people living along the coast. "It's a struggle for our lives, for our livelihood and for our water.

"There is a fork in the road and the choice we have today is to continue fossil fuel exploration or to transition to renewable energy" Thomson said. "We cannot afford any more exploration. Is Sasol aware that if we explore for oil and gas, these could become stranded assets?" Thomson said the organisation was concerned Sasol was working with Eni, which had experienced massive explosions at its pipeline in the Niger Delta.

However, the firm has reportedly blamed this on saboteurs. "Eni's operations have resulted in loss of fishing grounds, death and destruction," Thomson said. A representative of Wild Oceans and the Stanger community, Khalid Mather, said seismic surveys and drilling for natural resources undermined the ocean, driving away fish and other marine life.

He said the coastal community depended on the ocean for their livelihoods, domestic tourism and small businesses. "South Africans are pleading with you today not to destroy the environment," Mather said. Sasol upstream vice president John Harris said he was struck by the passion for the environment expressed by residents. He declined to comment on the allegations of corruption against Eni, as the matter was sub judice. Harris said the firm had a responsibility to affect the commitments made at the Cop21 Paris, which South Africa had signed.

“We are trying to work with the government to move away from a carbon intensive economy to a less carbon intensive, and maybe to a carbon neutral system. The end solution is a carbon free society from an energy perspective, and South Africa doesn’t want to be disadvantaged by rushing into that by not having a sustainable economy,” Harris said.

He said the firm hoped it could further develop the country’s hydrocarbon resources. He said he was also very passionate about the environment and had not been involved in any of the environmental disasters highlighted at the meeting.

He said the firm was busy with the environmental impact assessment process, which would include a public consultation meeting in June. “.61. company called PGS is carrying out a seismic survey, and we have a marine mammal observer on board and someone who assists to see if there are any dolphins in the area. We are taking our responsibility seriously PGS is not acquiring it for us, it is part of the process.

“We will review the data and it may show there is nothing of interest, and then we won’t drill any wells,” Harris said. A spokesperson for Eni said last night that a wide ranging investigation had cleared the firm of allegations of bribery resulting in Milan’s prosecutors’ office closing the case in 2016, but the judge at the preliminary hearing then ordered the firm and its managers to stand trial in 2017.

“The board of directors of Eni, also based on the result of independent investigations, confirmed its total confidence that neither the company or its chief executive were involved in the alleged illicit conduct. The board of directors reaffirmed such confidence in December 2017 and did so again with our chairman’s statement at Eni’s AGM,” she said.

She added that Eni’s operating model focused on reducing risk as well as environmental and social impacts. “This has granted us an excellent track record in safety” she said.

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