

South Sudan's legacy of environmental pollution

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South Sudan abandoned oil field sparks environmental hazard. Video: AFP



THAR JATH – Inside one of the territories controlled by forces loyal to rebel leader Riek Machar in Unity State, lies one of the country's crucial oil treatment facility, the Thar Jath oilfield.

The oilfield was reportedly deserted in August 2013, four months before a conflict erupted between Riek Machar and government troops supporting President Salva Kiir.

Since then it has been left abandoned and the offices of the oil company in charge of running the plant have been looted.

Once a crucial part of South Sudan's mainstay industry, it now poses severe health and environmental hazard.

An [investigation](#) by a German aid group, Sign of Hope, and water drilling experts African Water Ltd, confirmed that oil exploration and production from Thar Jath has been contaminating drinking water sources for at least 180, 000 people in Unity State.

At Rier, one of the worst-affected villages, tests of the local water well have shown high levels of unpalatable salt and poisonous lead.

"This water is too salty ... the taste is too bad," said Agar Jok, 35, a mother of eight.

She said people who drink from the well end up vomiting or contracting diarrhoea, especially children.

With no one in charge of the oil facility and maintaining the plant, it is feared that the worst is yet to emerge out the abandoned oil facility.

The unmaintained facility, which lies inside rebel-held territory, is slowly rotting and leaking toxic oil into the earth.

The aid group, Sign of Hope, said it is now investigating reports of birth defects and other serious illnesses.

"The situation is very worrying," said Klaus Stieglitz of Sign of Hope, a German aid group which operates in both rebel and government-controlled parts of the country.

"The next rainy season can allow what is up-to-now contained oil to spill over. The oil is seeping into the water table."

Standing at Thar Jath, Stieglitz pointed to a football field-sized pit near the plant: "It's a large amount of oil in a hole that is not isolated from the ground.

It adds, in a dramatic way, to the contamination of drinking water that was already here."

Samples taken by Sign of Hope between 2009 and 2013 - even before the war broke out - revealed the contamination of groundwater by oil activities in the area.

Local authorities also say the uncontrolled growth of thick, dry vegetation in and around the plant could spark a dangerous inferno.

"This now dry grass can set the facility on fire," said Majil