

Charge not car 'Poll Tax'

17 FEBRUARY 2003 sees the introduction of London Mayor Ken Livingstone's £5 congestion charge for drivers to use central London's scarce road space.

The principle of on-street car parking fees and charging motorists to use roads harmonises with advocates of taxing scarce natural resources as an efficient method for organising economies. The daily charge is intended to ease congestion. All revenue will be invested directly back into the capital's transport systems.

London's average traffic speeds through the working day are under 10 mph with drivers spending 50 per cent of their time in queues, costing London firms between £2m and £4m a week.

Controversy has dogged the charge's introduction, with Livingstone accused of adjusting traffic lights and introducing unnecessary road works to slow traffic in the lead-in time so that the roads will seem less snarled-up after the charge comes in. The Mayor strenuously denies this, saying his opponents are engaged in an extensive campaign of disinformation.

Steven Norris, Conservative candidate and runner up to Livingstone in the 2000 Mayoral race, describes the charge as a "Poll Tax on wheels". The Mayor points out it is not a tax, but a price mechanism designed to improve quality of life in London by reducing traffic, encouraging use of public transport, benefiting business efficiency, and improving the environment for walking and cycling.



Future perfect? Drivers can find out more at www.cclondon.com

Oil fund key to Niger delta wealth

A NEW INITIATIVE based on the principles of resource rental and sustainable development hopes to redistribute the oil wealth from Nigeria's Niger delta. The proposed Niger Delta Fund will be similar to the successful Alaska Permanent Fund, which holds part of Alaska's vast mineral wealth in perpetuity, using the income to pay dividends to citizens.

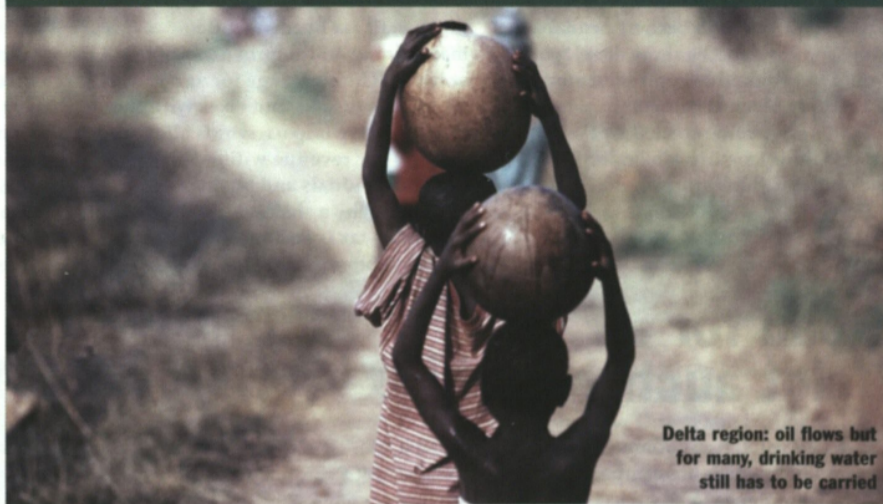
The project is sponsored by Nigeria's Africa Center for Geoclassical Economics and Pennsylvania's Earth Rights Institute, who say the Fund will "bring economic prosperity to the region along with enhanced security incentives for uninterrupted oil production". It will use oil royalties to pay local people individual dividends. The remaining money will go for sustainable development loans, conflict resolution

and conservation programmes.

Oil is vital to Nigeria's economy, but it has also brought social unrest, crime and corruption. In the past five years dozens of oil workers have been kidnapped, pumping stations occupied and cars and helicopters hijacked. Environmentalists say once-rich farm land and fishing waters have been devastated, and the delta's people are among the poorest.

Gordon Abiama, director of the Centre for Geoclassical Economics, believes this is because "oil revenues have not been distributed to the people of the region" and "a substantial portion of these funds have found their way into private bank accounts in western countries."

Senator David Dafinone, chairman of the Union of Niger Delta People, has called for a trust fund for oil proceeds. www.earthrights.net/nigeria/



Delta region: oil flows but for many, drinking water still has to be carried

Colonialism's legacy?

CAN THE ORIGINS of the Southern African famine be traced to the colonial distribution of land? What is the connection between debt and the privatised system of money creation? These issues are explored at the online Legacy of Colonialism forum, which brings together voices from around the globe campaigning on issues associated with land rights and the exploitation of developing nations.

The forum focuses on how the colonial past of many nations has blighted their prosperity, and how the current economic systems need to be overhauled. Visit www.legacyofcolonialism.org

Debt relief cash 'not wasted'

ONE OF THE most common arguments used against Third World debt relief is that the money is squandered by irresponsible governments, and fails to reach the people most in need. But a study published by Jubilee Research, the successor to Jubilee 2000, has effectively disproved this claim: African countries that have had some of their debts cancelled spend more on health and education as a result, and no more on defence. www.jubileeresearch.org