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Shell gas field protesters threaten to turn Ireland into a new Nigeria

'Rossport Five' warn that more local people are ready to go to jail over plans to pipe raw gas across their land

Tim Webb

The Rossport Five, who went to jail last year for their protests against a planned Shell gas pipeline in Ireland, have warned that the company will need army protection if it does not change its plans.

Vincent McGrath spent 94 days in jail with four other County Mayo landowners over their campaign against the Corrib gas project. He told *The Independent* on Sunday that more protesters, including women and children, would be prepared to go to jail to try to stop the pipeline going ahead.

The two sides have held two mediation sessions in the past two months to find a compromise, but Mr McGrath said little progress had been made.

The campaign will next focus on the company's annual shareholder meeting in a fortnight. Mr McGrath said he and other protesters had recently become shareholders and were considering attending the meeting.

A shareholder pressure group, the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR), earlier this year put forward a resolution requesting that the company consult with local communities affected by such development plans as the Corrib project.

The ECCR has contacted other shareholders about the resolution, including fund managers F&C and the lobby group Pirc. A spokesman for F&C said: "It's something we are looking into with interest."

The ECCR is hoping that the resolution will gain as much support as a similar resolution it proposed over Shell's activities in Nigeria at the company's annual shareholder meeting in 1997. The well-publicised resolution gained 10 per cent of the vote, with more abstaining.

The Corrib gas field is 70km off the west coast of Ireland. Protesters object to Shell's plans to build a pipeline to transport the gas from the well to a refinery 9km inland.

The Rossport Five, whose land borders the planned pipeline route, say raw, unrefined gas being piped close to several villages puts 130 people in danger. They want Shell to build the refinery either on the coast or at sea. Shell says that building the refinery off the rocky coast would not be economic and that it would also be an eyesore.

A spokesman said Shell and other oil companies had further projects that involved pipelines carrying raw gas over land but it did not know how many were situated near communities. "Best international industry practice is now moving towards developing offshore fields linked to an onshore gas terminal," he said.

Mr McGrath said the protesters were not against the project in principle but that the company had not consulted properly with the community.

"We recognise Shell's interest in bringing gas to market," he said. "We are not against progress: we are not Luddites. Their position and our position are not irreconcilable. We just want it to be done properly."

Shell is still awaiting the publication of an independent safety report on the project. If it proves favourable, it will press ahead. The construction schedule is not known. But Mr McGrath warned the only way Shell could proceed without a compromise agreement on the overland pipeline would be by force.

"They will have to bring the guards and the army," he said. "The spectacle of our police and army protecting a private company will not look good. Lots of people are prepared to go to jail, including women and children. This is about the survival of the community."