

## COMMENT

# TOTAL OIL AND GAS: MATCH MADE IN HELL

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TWO YEARS ago a French court found French oil and gas major Total guilty of bribing a foreign public official in Iran. The crime is said to have happened between 1997 and 2004. For this very serious and familiar criminal offence between big corporates and government, the company was fined €500 000 (R10 million). A very soft slap on the wrist considering the profits the oil giant rakes in year in and year out.

In another similar case in the US, Total settled a \$245.2m fine in 2013. According to the US Justice Department, the charges were related to violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in connection with illegal payments made through third parties to a government official in Iran.

The court found that Total mischaracterised the unlawful payments as “business development expenses” when they were, in fact, bribes designed to corruptly influence a foreign official.

By all historical facts and current developments, Total SA seems to be going the opposite direction, away from their ambition to become the responsible energy major, as they put it.

Early last year President Cyril Ramaphosa, gleaming with excitement, officially announced to the nation Total SA’s offshore discovery.

TEPSA, the South African arm of Total, said it had made a significant gas condensate discovery after drilling its Brulpadda prospects on Block 11B/12B in the Outeniqua Basin.

On August 12, Minerals Minister Gwede Mantashe acknowledged the arrival and offered a warm welcome to the Deepsea Stavanger in Cape Town, an oil and gas drill rig commissioned by Total.

The 43 708 ton rig has left Mossel Bay and is currently on its way to spud the Luiperd well 110km south of Knysna.

“This is in the middle of vast breeding and feeding grounds for all kinds of marine creatures, which support our lives and livelihoods. The impacts of drilling waste, leaking wells or even a blow out will be felt by all South Africans, Mozambicans and Namibians,” Judy Bell, Frack-Free SA, said.

Furthermore, the public participation process did not include fishing communities and people living and working in the affected coastline.

“Total must not take advantage of the State of Disaster to fast-track authorisations through lack of consultation and transparency. Total has failed to reveal the true results of its Brulpadda well findings and accidents reports of earlier drilling failures.

“It has failed to make financial provision for abandoned wells, blowouts and disasters, which would fall on to South Africa. It has failed to consider the needs and desirability in a transition to a low carbon economy and the impacts of fossil fuels on South Africa’s extremely high green house gas emissions,” Avena Jacklin, Climate and Energy Justice campaign manager, said.

Ramaphosa has committed to acting swiftly to significantly reduce carbon emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change. Oil and gas companies are responsible for 71% of global carbon dioxide emissions and risk losing \$2.2 trillion on stranded assets by 2030.

The repercussions of oil leaks and spills could devastate the Southern African fishing industry and our shores as we have witnessed in Mauritius. Total and its contracting vessels have not committed to covering the economic costs of clean-up operations and compensations for impacts on ecosystems and livelihoods. South Africa cannot afford the risk that Total brings to our country.

So here is what we have, oil discoveries that are set to cause destruction on the environment, a multinational corporation with a tainted track record, and a government that has failed to decisively deal with corruption – it is a match made the hell.

*Molefe is the Media, Information, and Publications campaign manager at groundWork, Friends of the Earth SA.*

