Officials estimate thousands of people may be affected by the problem, which officials blame on damage to the oil fields during fighting two years ago. Oil company representatives said they are aware of the issue and are providing clean drinking water to anyone who needs it.

“A lot has to be done in terms of regulations and environmental assessment.”

Benjamin Majak DauActing State Information Minister Benjamin Majak Dau said he received reports about the leaking crude in the Tharjath oil field late last week from a national environmental task force. He warned that thousands of people could be using the tainted water for everything from washing dishes to drinking.

“A lot has to be done in terms of regulations and environmental assessment,” he said. “A great deal of damage had been landed on our areas, especially the oil producing counties.”

Dau says national officials have been investigating the extent of the damage in Unity State and a Ministry of Petroleum task force aims to submit a report by the end of this week.

It is expected to include specific recommendation for the Chinese owned Greater Pioneer Operating Company, which operates in Unity State’s oil fields, to stop crude from leaching into the groundwater, a source told The Niles.

In addition to providing safe drinking water for all local residents, Dau wants Greater Pioneer executives to warn the thousands of residents living near the groundwater about the potential risks of drinking the contaminated water.

Benny Ngor, Greater Pioneer Operating Deputy Field Production Manager, said they set up a tanker with clean water so that people living near the fields can access water free of charge for themselves and their animals.

“The leak may contaminate a lot of areas.”

Benny Ngor“The company is much concerned about the health of people in the surrounding communities […]. The leak may contaminate a lot of areas and during dry season most of our cattle and some people are drinking from those ponds,” warned Ngor.

Ngor says any leakage from the oil fields is likely the result of damage from bombs being dropped near the fields in 2011 and 2012. Meanwhile, heavy rainfall has reportedly added to the spread of the oil.

Dau urged South Sudanese employees of the oil fields to form unions to improve awareness of their basic rights.

The Ministry of Petroleum reported last month that the oil fields in Unity State have produced 1.8 billion barrels of oil since production resumed in August.

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