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HOME OUR WORLD NIGERIA: VILLAGE RAID SHOWS DANGERS IN OIL DELTA

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Nigeria: Village raid shows dangers in oil delta

by Jon Gambrell



OKWAGBE, Nigeria (AP) — As the heavily armed Nigerian soldiers slipped closer to a suspected militant camp in the country's oil-rich southern delta, they were ready for a fight after suffering casualties only days earlier.

They launched a massive attack, including aerial bombings, that was aimed at finding a wanted militant. Civilians caught in the middle tried to escape with their lives, human rights activists say.

As many as 150 people died in the fighting Wednesday and subsequent raids around Ayakoromor, a village lacking mobile phone reception and only accessible via the Niger Delta's maze of winding creeks, activists say. However, the military says it fired only after being fired upon.

Still, the violence represents yet another example of how those toiling in poverty in a region that makes billions for Nigeria find themselves caught between a military seeking revenge and power-hungry militants.

"In this country, we have only two classes of being," said Casely Omon-Irabor, a lawyer representing the hunted militant John Togo. "The oppressed and the oppressor."

The attack around Ayakoromor, a small village in Delta state, included heavy machine gun blasts from Navy vessels and bombing runs by military aircraft. However, the region's main military commander in the fight against militants denied Saturday that any civilians died in the recent assaults, while acknowledging soldiers opened fire on the shoreline of the civilian village after reportedly being shot at.

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"We were taken aback by the volume of fire that was brought to bear on the troops when we approached Ayakoromor on the way to John Togo's camp," Gen. Charles Omoregie told journalists at a news conference. "Soldiers had to fight their way into the camp."

Omoregie said homes in the village burned after ricocheting rifle rounds exploded gasoline and kerosene canisters.

Those with family in the village, like engineer Yeigagha Henry, offered a different account. Residents able to escape the village told him his 76-year-old father died at the hands of the soldiers.

"They set the house ablaze," Henry calmly recounted Saturday in the nearby city of Okwagbe. "He died inside."

A list compiled by Oghebejabor Ikim, national coordinator for the Warri-based Forum of Justice and Human Rights Defense, identified 18 of the dead. Ikim said residents told him that soldiers burned down the local customary court and a maternity ward, as well as many homes in the area.

Access to Ayakoromor remained tightly controlled by the military Saturday. Officials with the Nigerian Red Cross made it inside, but a military commander blocked two journalists working for The Associated Press from entering the village, citing a security risk.

Violence in the area also may be continuing. Soldiers manning a boat landing in Okwagbe speaking in the Hausa language said someone suffered injuries Saturday. A commander ordered guards to avoid bringing the injured person past waiting journalists.

Militant and military attacks are nothing new to the Niger Delta, a region of creeks and mangroves about the size of South Carolina. The attacks from an insurgency that began in 2006 cut drastically into crude production in Nigeria, an OPEC-member nation that is one of the top suppliers of crude oil to the U.S.

Production has risen back to 2.2 million barrels of oil a day, in part because many militant leaders and fighters accepted a government-sponsored amnesty deal last year.

But as militants over the years profit from kidnapping and oil theft, the military has launched several reprisal massacres against villages. Often, civilians find themselves caught in the middle of a war over oil they never profit from.

Instead, they eek out a living in petty trading, fishing and subsistence farming as their children attend classes in rundown schools with rusting corrugated roofs and clinic cabinets remain barren of needed anti-malaria drugs.

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"What they get as the dividends of democracy, what they get as part of oil revenue is human slaughter," said Anyakwee Nsirimovu, the executive director of the Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Port Harcourt. "It's unacceptable and I think children and young people who watch their parents die and their houses get burned down will find a way of fighting back."

Meanwhile, both militants and the military find it lucrative for violence to continue — especially when it comes to the large-scale oil theft that plagues the foreign oil firms working in the region. That stolen crude, easily refined, fetches top dollar on the black market. But in order for the oil to leave the country, security agencies patrolling the delta must let container ships slip away unstopped.

Between oil theft, amnesty program cash payouts and additional combat pay offered to soldiers in the region, Nsirimovu said only the civilians get left out — until the violence comes.

"People who profit from the violence in the Niger Delta would not want that violence to end," he said.

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Photo Caption: Women who fled following a deadly army attack on Ayakoromor village take refuge with other members of the community at a microcredit organization in the nearby town of Warri, Nigeria, Saturday, Dec. 4, 2010. The military launched Wednesday a massive attack including aerial bombings that was aimed at finding a wanted militant. Civilians caught in the middle tried to escape with their lives, human rights activists say. The violence represents yet another example of how those toiling in poverty in a region that makes billions for Nigeria find themselves caught between a military seeking revenge and power-hungry militants.(AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)

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