

N/Delta: Soldiers raid militants' hideouts

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Port Harcourt with Agency report

INCENSED by the killing of 17 soldiers recently, the Nigerian Army yesterday railed the hide-outs of militants at troubled oil-rich Niger Delta.

However, the arrowhead of militancy in the zone, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) on Wednesday declared a temporary ceasefire after two bloody gun battles with soldiers.

MEND's peace overture came as Army commanders were summoned to Abuja over the escalating violence in Niger Delta, but the military refused to comment on the meetings.

peachment

premises.

•MEND declares temporary ceasefire

According to agency reports, the Nigerian soldiers raided bases of oil militants with gunboats and helicopter gunships, while unconfirmed report quoted the militants as saying that they killed some soldiers.

Nigeria's oil output is still 25 per cent down after a wave of attacks in February, 2006.

Nigeria is Africa's biggest oil producer but the militants demand more local control of oil wealth for residents of the Niger Delta.

Nine soldiers were killed when MEND fighters battled nine military patrol boats backed up by a helicopter gunship for one-and-a-half hours around Shell's Ekulama

oil flow station, 40 kilometres (25 miles) west of Port Harcourt, the militants said, who also claimed they seized two military gunboats.

In a separate incident, the militants said they killed two soldiers and six sailors.

"After a brief shoot-out in which they were all killed, we boarded the houseboat and collected all the weapons aboard," the group said.

The British government has responded to the attacks by warning against all but essential travel to the Niger Delta.

The latest attacks comes two days after another armed group killed at least 10 soldiers by raiding a convoy of barges

carrying fuel in the same region, while the 16 oil workers kidnapped in a raid on Monday have been freed, the last of a group of 25 captives to be released.

The BBC's Alex Last in Lagos said the Nigerian military and oil companies face a serious dilemma in how to respond to the upsurge in violence.

The oil companies do not want to see any heavy-handed military action which could exacerbate the situation and endanger the lives of their workers, our correspondent says.

The militants say they are fighting for greater local control of oil wealth.