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15 killed as soldiers dislodge militants

•At Ogboinbiri platform

FUNKE ODUWOLE, Lagos and DENNIS NAKU, Yenagoa

AT least 15 people including 12 militants, two civilians and a soldier were feared killed yesterday during a gun battle between soldiers and militants at an oil platform occupied by the latter in Ogboinbiri community in Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa State.

Also, 10 oil workers were rescued by soldiers who recaptured the oil platform hitherto occupied by the militants.

Commander of the Joint Military Task Force (ITF) in the Niger Delta, Brig. Gen. Lawrence Ngubane confirmed the incident in a telephone interview with *Daily Champion*.

He, however, refused to comment on the casualty figures but said the army was in full control of the platform.

Militants from the area had invaded the oil flow station run by Italian energy giant Eni SPA last Sunday and engaged soldiers protecting the facility in a duel.

During the attack, 12 of the affected soldiers and nine oil workers were reportedly taken hostage by the militants and government gave the community 48 hours to produce the missing persons. The ultimatum expired yesterday.

Prior to the expiration, residents of Ogboinbiri began to flee their homes following deployment of troops to the troubled area by the Federal Government.

However, during the gun battle which lasted several hours yesterday, nine civilian hostages were rescued and the oil platform which was occupied by the militants for about four days was recaptured by the army.

Whereabouts of the soldiers earlier abducted by the militants could not be ascertained.

Italian firm, Eni, which operates the platform, had said that about 28 people had been taken hostage - the reason for the discrepancy is not clear.

According to the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, local villagers had fled the area in case they were caught up in heavy fighting. The army had sent in troops reinforcements and four gunboats ahead of the battle.

President Umaru Yar'Adua pledged to try and bring peace to Nigeria's oil region when he took office last month.

Last week, militant leader Majaheed Dokubo-Asari was freed from prison on bail on health grounds after spending almost two years in custody on treason charges.

His release had been one of the main demands of the armed groups who have staged attacks on oil installations in the Niger Delta.

Southern militants are fighting to retain oil wealth in their region

He has since urged his followers not to take hostages.

"We are fighting injustice, we should not do injustice to other people," he said on his return to the main oil city, Port Harcourt.

But there are many different armed groups in the region - some with political demands for more of Nigeria's oil wealth to be used to help local people, others criminal, seeking ransom payments from foreign oil companies.

No group has claimed responsibility for the seizure of the Ogboinbiri platform in Bayelsa State so far.

Meanwhile, fresh fighting has erupted between soldiers and militants at Imiringi in Ogbia local government area of the state.

But *Daily Champion* could not immediately ascertain the cause of the hostility. The state gas turbine is located in Imiringi.

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