

20 Cameroonian Soldiers Killed in Bakassi Clash

convictions and effected over 400 arrests and prosecutions. People who used to be esteemed or feared for this ill-

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•Nigeria: *We're not involved*

At least 20 Cameroonian soldiers were killed during a fierce fighting in the Bakassi Peninsula with gunmen suspected to be Niger Delta militants.

Cameroonian military sources said the attackers who ambushed a speed boat wore Nigerian military uniforms.

*By Paul Ohia in Lagos, Juliana Taiwo in Abuja
and Okon Bassey in Uyo*

But yesterday, in Abuja, military authorities distanced the Nigerian army from the attack, saying the raid could have been carried out by the same group

of gunmen that had earlier attacked a nearby oil terminal run by Exxon Mobil.

The Federal Government
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also last night denied that Nigerian soldiers were responsible for the killings.

Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Ojo Maduekwe, said preliminary investigations showed that Nigerian soldiers had nothing to do with the attack.

THISDAY learnt that the soldiers were killed on Monday in the high sea during a fierce encounter with Niger Delta militants who were returning to base after an unsuccessful strike at the Exxon Mobil Operational Base at the Quoe Ibo Terminus (QIT) in Ibeno Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State.

The clash between the militants and the soldiers was said to have occurred at a fishing community of Ine-Uyah in former Bakassi Local Government Area of the Akwa Ibom State now a

Cameroonian territory. It was gathered that the soldiers who were patrolling the waterways saw unusual speed boats passing through the areas and that an attempt to stop the boats whose occupants they did not know led to an exchange of fire.

Militants in about 11 speed-boats tried to invade Exxon Mobil Operational Base in Ibeno early last Monday but the

operation was unsuccessful.

One woman was killed while many others were wounded during the attempted invasion.

Apparently rattled by the unsuccessful mission, the militants on their way back decided to vent their anger on the Cameroonian soldiers.

But a *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* reporter said Cameroonian military sources told him that those who attacked the military boat carrying food intended for soldiers on the Peninsula wore Nigerian military uniforms.

He said the attackers killed the Cameroonian soldiers on board and put on their uniforms after which they went to the Peninsula where they shot and wounded more unsuspecting soldiers before making away with some military equipment.

According to him, it was not clear if the attack was an opportunistic attempt to grab weapons or an attempt to show dissatisfaction with the handing over of the Peninsula to Cameroun.

So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

However, the Director of Information, Army Headquarters, Col. Solomon Giwa Amu, told journalists in

Abuja that the Nigeria Army was not involved in the attack, explaining that Nigeria had pulled out of Bakassi since August 24, 2006 and had never returned to the Peninsula.

He said the relationship between the two countries remained cordial and there was no reason for Nigerian troops to attack Cameroonian soldiers.

He said militants or pirates might have been responsible for the attack.

Amu said Nigerian troops in the Niger Delta had been issued a red alert warning because they might be the next target of attack.

According to him, the Nigerian Army was ready and willing to help arrest the perpetrators of the attack and bring them to justice.

"This is an era of the rule of law and there has not been any reason for us to attack soldiers in the Bakassi area since we successfully pulled out in August. The relationship has been normalised between both countries and there is no reason for us to attack the Cameroonian soldiers.

"We have commenced investigations into the matter and if it is confirmed that the perpetrators are hoodlums, militants or pirates, we are willing and

ready to offer our services for them to be arrested and brought to book," he said.

Maduekwe told a correspondent of *News Agency of Nigeria (NAN)* that it was too hasty to blame Nigeria for the attack

"We are investigating and we will be happy for any information the Cameroonian authorities can give," Maduekwe said.

He explained that Nigeria was determined to maintain close and cordial relations with Cameroon "that is not only our neighbour but with which we share brotherly and filial links."

The minister said Nigeria would continue to respect agreements that led to the withdrawal of its troops from Bakassi in 2006 and the World Court judgment delivered at The Hague in October 2002, which ceded the oil-rich Peninsula to Cameroun.

The minister pointed out that Nigeria was on its own dealing with non-state actors in the Bakassi issue and called for careful handling of the issue by both countries.

He said Nigeria's position remained that of regret and condolences adding that, "Nigeria is committed to peace and tranquility with all its neighbours."

Nigeria handed over the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun

in August, last year, in compliance with a ruling of the International Court of Justice at The Hague.

The Peninsula had been administered by Nigeria since independence from Britain in 1960.

However, Cameroon based its claim of sovereignty over the region on maps dating back to the colonial era and was successful at the International Court of Justice after a lengthy case.

Bakassi juts into the Gulf of Guinea, an area which may contain up to 10 per cent of the world's oil and gas reserves. It is also rich in fish.

Meanwhile, work is yet to resume at the Exxon Mobil Operational base at QIT as a result of the invasion of the area by militants.

When THISDAY visited the area yesterday, the entrance gate to the premises was under lock and key.

Security has also been beefed up around all the offices of the Exxon Mobil in the locality.

Police Public Relations Officer (PPRO) in the state, Mr. Gabriel Ngban, said the tight security was to pave the way for the return of Exxon Mobil operations and protect the company's oil facility.