

SOPURUCHI ONWUKA, *Lagos*
CHINEDU WOSU, *Port Harcourt*

Sallah tragedy: 30 die in pipeline fire

MORE than 30 persons were yesterday feared killed, in a pipeline fire explosion at a jetty in Okochiri Okrika community of Rivers state.

The fire said to have emanated from illegal bunkering destroyed property belonging to the Port Harcourt Refinery.

But the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) has assured that the incident would not affect supply of

petroleum products during the Yuletide.

Disturbed by the inferno, the Rivers state government appealed to people of the state to be law abiding and refrain from criminal activities.

The secretary to the Rivers state government, Mr. Magnus Abe in a statement said the

state government would want to use this medium to appeal to all those involved in negative and

criminal activities, including kidnapping, bunkering, sea piracy, armed robbery and cultism, who have done so much in the past, to discredit and destroy our beloved state, to please, in the name of God, cease all such activities forthwith, and surrender all illegal arms in their possession to the relevant law enforcement agencies.

He further stressed that governor Chibuike Rotimi

Amaechi, would ensure "that our people shall no longer live in fear. All those purveyors of terror and their Political sponsors, who have preyed on society for their means of livelihood, should have a rethink. We call on all Rivers people not to be cowed as together we shall overcome, we shall with God on our side, reclaim our state from cultist

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and criminals".

Rivers state police spokesperson, Mrs. Ireju Barasud confirmed the explosion and the death of some victims which number she could not ascertain.

Also operatives of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) yesterday shot dead three suspected militants during a shoot-out in the area.

Daily Champion learnt that four speed boats belonging to the militants were burnt during the encounter. The state police commissioner Felix Ogbaudu confirmed the incident but could not ascertain the cause of the fire nor the casualty figure but the group spokesman of NNPC,

Sallah

Dr. Levi Ajuonuma, said the fire was a fall out of a clash between feuding militant groups in the region.

He said the NNPC fire unit secured assistance from the Rivers State Fire Service and community people in quenching the inferno before it could spread to Okiriko communities in Rivers State.

Dr. Ajuonuma could not confirm the number of casualties nor destruction of loading vessels but death toll is estimated at over 30 persons.

He said soldiers have condoned of the area while pumping have been stopped to the feeder pipeline until the

situation normalizes.

He said the damage to the jetty had not been fully assessed to determine how long it would remain out of service, but he warned marketers in the region against hoarding of products as the would be no fuel shortage in the market.

He appealed to the warring militants to "sheath their swords" and also saluted the gallantry of the security forces for bringing the situation under control.

"Our correspondent who took a boat ride to the nearby marine base jetty reports that over 50 persons were involved in the illicit deal even as some yet to be disclosed persons escaped the burnt.

Particulars of the burnt