



Militants in a speed boat.

## P/ Harcourt: Hot bed of gangsters

Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State since the beginning of 2008, had witnessed killings and sporadic shootings which maimed and scared investors, including bank officials and customers as most practising journalists were recently shot. **CHINEDU NWOSU in PORT HARCOURT** reports on the gangsterism:

RESIDENTS of Port Harcourt city, the state capital of the oil rich Rivers state that host over sixty per cent of the multinational oil companies and five higher institutions including two sea ports and one international airport would not forget January 14, 2008 in a hurry as most inhabitants of the city went to their beds weeping for their loved ones while others were in various mortuaries attending to their dead bodies as most journalists in the city thronged hospitals sympathising with their injured colleagues as hoodlums and gangsters rained bullets in the corners of the major roads and streets looking for whom to claim his precious life.

The day also sent cold signals to nerves of members of the Nigeria Police Force in the state as their agile colleague, Inspector Paulinus Amachi, attached to the general manager, Nigeria Ports Authority, NPA, Mr. Sotonye Etomi was gunned down by unknown suspected hoodlums at Borokiri area of the city while in an escort.

The sad incident also claimed the lives of other civilians and injured scores of others even as the vehicle conveying the late police officer was severely shattered by rains of bullets even as the NPA manager remain unhurt.

The gangsterism later shifted its twin ugly face to a vessel at the Port Harcourt port loaded with petroleum products and awaiting to be discharged when suddenly, gunmen detonated substance suspected to dynamites on the ship in the early hours of Friday, January 11, 2008 and consumed nearly half of the vessel.

Although MEND has claimed responsibility of the attack on the GOLDEN LUCY SHIP, officials of the NPA said the incident was as a result of marine accident discharge that took place in the ship.

The inferno on the ship did not claim lives but over three persons were severely injured as they are presently receiving treatment in hospitals across the city.

Police, in the confirmation of both incidents, said only the inspector died in the explosion targeted at the vehicle of the NPA manager. Others sustained injuries while the command's image maker, Mrs. Ireju Barasua (DSP) said in the case of the fire at the NPA, no life was lost but two persons sustained high degree of burns when the fire gutted the vessel.

Also reacting to the fire, NPA Public Relations Officer, Mr. Suwade Issah said one police officer was killed in the shooting involving the vehicle of the port

manager and two persons, including the driver sustained injuries. He insisted that the manager was not attacked in the incident.

On the attack of the NPA manager's vehicle and the killing of the inspector including the detonation of dynamite on the vessel, the police could not perfect any arrest on the culprits as they escaped jubilating on their success.

The recent attack on the city now appeared to have been targeted at journalists in the state as gunmen on January 17, 2008 in the Ikwerre road axis of the city shot a journalist and the bureau chief of Tribune Newspapers, Mr. John Ogbedu and the correspondent of *Daily Independent*, Mr. Gabriel Ogbolowung on their thighs while performing their duties.

The real identities of the men who shot the two journalists are still yet unknown as Mr. John Ogbedu is now walking with the aid of clutches.

Mr. Ogbedu, who was returning from a bank along the Ikwerre road when three young men on motorcycle pointed gun at him and demanded money from him, later handed over N180,000 to the hoodlums who still shot him on his thighs and escaped.

The *Daily Independent* correspondent was attacked by suspected assassins at his home community Ngo in Rivers State. He was severely beaten by his attackers but was not shot. He is also receiving medical attention in a hospital near the community.

The 19<sup>th</sup> of January also recorded serious shootings and carting away of money from banks across the city by robbers and hoodlums as a bank in Bonny Island was attacked and cash stolen even as bank staff were shot. Also in Port Harcourt, that same day, a young man was shot at the thighs by suspected gangsters as he was coming out from a bank. The robbers shot sporadically,

scaring away people. Even a mobile police officer near the scene of the attack took to his heels for safety and no arrest was also made on the attack.

While the Bonny robbery was on, another group of hoodlums seized a bullion van coming from Abia State to Rivers State and nearly carted away over N200 million from the drivers before the Joint Task Force intercepted them and rescued the bullion van despite injuries sustained by the bank officials on duty.

As the residents of the city sleep with one eye closed, so also they walk on the streets with one leg up as robbers and gangsters could strike any time, kill and maim innocent persons including security operatives and journalists.

It is now a risk for one to go to banks in the city as a little brown envelop in your hand attracts gun shot or losing ones life to miscreants and robbers.

Late 2007, the chief of staff in the state government house escaped being killed by whiskers as his vehicle was severely attacked by unknown gunmen in the city. Blood spilled all over his jeep that was carrying his colleague, although nobody died in the attack.

The security agents and other paramilitary organisations, observers said, should beef up security across the city and arrest these miscreants behind this lawlessness in the city in order to let investors do business.

It is a thing of sadness that, Port Harcourt which was one time garden city is now the hot bed of gangsters who maim, kill and rape ladies despite depriving them of their peace and cart away their precious property without any arrest from the police force.

The recent gangsterism, killings and stealing in the city is far from the Niger Delta peaceful agitation for resource control and fight against environmental degradations and youth empowerment.