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Countryman

MEND: Henry Okah killed

FRIDAY OLOKOR *with Agency report*

Govement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said yesterday that its leader Henry Okah was shot dead at a military hospital in Kaduna.

Reacting, the federal government said Okah was "in state custody."

Henry Okah is alive. He is in safe custody" presidential spokesman Mr Olusegun Adeniyi was quoted as saying by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

He said Okah was being held in Abuja.

However, MEND e-mail said: "Disturbing reports just reaching us suggest that Henry Okah succumbed to injuries from gunshot wounds at about 0400 hours today Tuesday at a military hospital in Kaduna state ... after he was shot in what those interrogating him claim was an 'accidental discharge'".

The MEND is giving the federal government ... the next 24 hours to confirm or deny this murder rumour," the group said, threatening violence in the Niger Delta.

"If it's true, I would be terrified because it beats the imagination how the boys would react. People would assume he was brought back to be killed," Annkio Briggs, a Niger Delta activist stated.

Okah led a wave of attacks on the oil industry that shut down a fifth of Nigerian output in 2006.

He was arrested in Angola on gun-running charges last September but MEND and the Angolan state-owned news agency said he was transferred to Nigerian authorities last Thursday.

Since the reports of his transfer emerged on Friday, the Nigerian authorities have not commented publicly on his whereabouts or what would happen to him.

Okah's faction of the MEND is one of many armed groups who say they are fighting to redress injustice in the impoverished Niger Delta, where 50 years of oil extraction have polluted the land and water while enriching corrupt politicians.

But crime and militancy are intertwined in the Niger Delta and such groups make big profits from kidnappings for ransom, from a lucrative trade in stolen oil or from providing thugs-for-hire to politicians who use them to steal elections.

