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## Militants kill 5 naval officers, Shell staff

DENNIS NAKU, *Yenagoa*

At least, five naval ratings and a staff of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) were feared killed, Thursday night along the waterways of Nembe Bassanbiri community, Bayelsa state, when armed youths attacked a gun boat.

*Saturday Champion* learnt that the naval officers and the SPDC staff were caught unaware by the rampaging youths, resulting to a gun battle that lasted for over three hours.

It was also gathered that the SPDC staff, identified as Dennis Kupkup, who was the only civilian in the boat and on his way to the state capital, was reportedly caught up in the cross fire.

The corpses of the five naval personnel and the SPDC staff were reported to have been deposited at the General Hospital in Nembe, while the only surviving officer is receiving treatment at the Federal Medical Centre, Yenagoa, the state capital.

Confirming the incident to newsmen in Yenagoa, chairman of the Nembe-Bassanbiri council of chiefs, Chief Alfred Tamuno, said preliminary investigation by the elders and chiefs of the community showed that youths involved in the killing were those involved in the failed September invasion of the community during the election into the youth executive council of the area.

The development was coming just as the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) in the Niger Delta said militants have continued to disrupt the peace process in the oil and gas rich area.

Deputy Commissioner of Police, Bayelsa state command, Mr. Abayomi Akerele, confirmed to our correspondent on telephone the incident in which five people were killed, but could however, not confirm if the incident was related to the local government elections.

"What we have heard is not connected to election violence," he said

Nembe/Bassanbiri had been plunged into crisis since September as a result of the crisis on who heads the youth executive council of Nembe, Bassambiri.

*Saturday Champion* recalls that in the skirmish that later ensued, over 20 people sustained injuries, while several others, particularly members of the rival factions of the youth committees, reportedly fled the area.

Only last week, the Nembe council of chiefs had granted amnesty to the affected youths and chiefs after the state governor, Chief Timipre Sylva, waded into the matter.

But Chief Tamuno said in Yenagoa yesterday that investigation by the elders in the community indicated that the same youths that caused the violence, were behind the attack on the Navy gun boats and subsequent killing of the ratings.

Our Correspondent gathered that the gun boat had been on patrol in the creeks and waterways of Nembe Bassambiri ahead of a stakeholders' meeting billed for today. The meeting had been called by the chiefs to work out modalities on how to select candidates for the election.

In a related development, coordinator of the JTF Media Campaign Centre, Lt Col. Rabe Abubakar, said the unprovoked attack against men of the task force in Clough Creek, Ekeremor local government area of the state, was uncalled for and only an attempt to push the military to an unwarranted confrontation.

Although there are fears that the casualty figure could be more, the incident has again raised the level of insecurity in the area.

"Militants in 20 speed boats attacked the JTF location in Clough Creek. There was no casualty but they attacked a civilian while escaping from our troops' superior fire power," Abubakar said.

He added that the attack had been aimed at creating an opportunity for illegal oil bunkerers to operate,

saying the JTF would not be pushed to engage the miscreants in a war as the taskforce was in the zone for internal security.

On the killings Thursday night, Abubakar said only the Navy PRO could speak on details of the alleged killing of the five naval ratings in Nembe.