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Tue, June 30, 2009

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**Countryman****Militants kill 20 soldiers**

•It's not true —JTF

TONY ITA ETIM, Port Harcourt

The war in the Niger Delta took another dimension yesterday as militants claimed they killed 20 soldiers after they sunk a gun boat belonging to the Joint Military Task force (JTF), during an attack on Shell oil facility.

While a Shell spokesman confirmed the raid and said it had caused a loss of production, JTF denied there had been any clash with the militants.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said the Shell Forcados off-shore platform in Delta State was burning "after a massive explosion" following their 2:30 am raid.

The MEND statement also said they sunk a gunboat with 20 and 23 soldiers on board.

"We have made it clear that patrols must not open fire at us as our target is the oil infrastructure.

"This unheeded warning resulted in the death of these soldiers."

But JTF spokesman colonel Rabe Abubakar denied its forces had clashed with MEND fighters.

"There was an attack on an isolated oil pipeline near Forcados. Our men were not there. So there was no confrontation. There was no way our soldiers would have been killed if there was no encounter."

Yesterday's raid was just the latest in a series that have targeted Shell facilities this month and which have continued despite last Thursday's offer from President Umaru Yar'Adua of an amnesty for the militants.

Forcados is one of the two main export facilities operated by Shell in Nigeria, along with the Bonny terminal further south in Rivers State.

The attacks aimed at Shell and other oil majors operating in the Niger Delta like Chevron and Agip have forced a cut in crude production by nearly one-third since 2006, when the country produced 2.6 million barrels a day.

Current production is about 1.8 million barrels a day.

Meanwhile, MEND has faulted the decision of the Federal Government to tie the release of Henry Okah to rulings from Angola and Equatorial Guinea.

"The sincerity of the government of Nigeria came into question again on Friday, June 26, 2009 after the Interior minister General Godwin Abbe (rtd) informed the nation that the release of a sick Henry Okah would now depend on consultations with the dictators and despots ruling Angola and Equatorial Guinea.

"The minister also lied when he said Okah travelled to Equatorial Guinea. The fact is that Mr Henry Okah has never set foot in that country; not even as an airport transit passenger."

The group alleged that in the case of Angola, the authorities in that country had severally wanted to release Okah and Atatah because they had no case to answer, but were prevented by the Nigerian ambassador in Angola from doing so.

MEND said: "That Edward Atatah, arrested together with Henry in Angola has long been set free because nothing incriminating came out of that business trip. If it were true that Okah went to purchase weapons as claimed, then Edward would not have been set free because both men travelled together to inspect the fishing trawler in Luanda, Angola which Henry wanted to purchase."

The group debunked claims that Mr. Innocent Iboroma and Mr Cletus Arerebo are representatives of Farah Dagogo and Boyloaf at high level talks.

Gbomo said: "Therefore the said meeting held in Port Harcourt between them and the Minister of Internal Affairs is a fraud.

"MEND will negotiate as a group when the right time comes. The impression the government is trying to give that commanders are negotiating independently is another propaganda aimed at causing confusion.

"Even though our commanders are constantly being bombarded with enticing monetary offers as much as 1 billion Naira per camp, only those who are willing to sell their birthright for a bowl of porridge will accept while the rest of us will continue the struggle until justice is achieved."

On the recent amnesty announced by the government, Gbomo said if successful, the on-going amnesty exercise directed at repentant criminals in the Niger Delta region will no doubt create an enabling environment for dealing with the Niger Delta question which freedom fighting groups such as MEND is waging.

He said it would separate the wheat from the chaff and allow the government to focus on the root issues instead of tying militancy with criminality as an excuse for not addressing the grievances of the Niger Delta people.

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