

Military denies executing MASSOB members

The defence ministry has denied claims that it is summarily executing Biafran separatists in Onitsha.

Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), the United Nation's news agency, reported on Monday claims made by the Movement To Actualise A Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), that 200 of its members had been shot dead since troops were deployed in Onitsha two months ago.

The UN news network, a free news service written by anonymous UN staff working in the region, reported that soldiers were shooting on the spot anyone found with a MASSOB identity card.

But Brigadier General Felix Chukwuma denied the allegations.

He told *Daily Trust* yesterday: "I have no idea of the picture you just painted because as an indigene of Onitsha, if soldiers were going on the rampage, I should have been notified. These are mere rumours and allegations and have no base."

By Ruby Rabi

According to IRIN, several residents interviewed said the security forces upon their deployment, embarked on a cordon-and-search operations in sections of the city, particularly in Fegge and Okpoko believed to be strongholds of MASSOB.

"Many people found with guns or MASSOB identity cards were summarily shot dead," Isotonu Nkwankwaka, a resident of the Fegge district, told IRIN.

Residents also accused the security forces of invading shops and markets in the city, which is one of the biggest trading towns in Nigeria, looting goods and stealing money.

IRIN reported: "At the Bridge Head market and Nkpor market, residents pointed out charred buildings and shops they said were burnt by soldiers."

IRIN quoted Innocent Dike, a MASSOB official in Onitsha, who said: "At least 200 suspected members of the group have been killed since troops were deployed. Several houses believed to belong to MASSOB activists were also razed,"