

Militiamen storm Port Harcourt

Militiamen torched a police station on Sunday as they rampaged through part of Port Harcourt the Rivers State capital to try to free a leader they believed had been jailed, residents said.

Security forces shot at the militiamen from a helicopter gunship, security sources and the residents said.

Police said one person was killed and several injured in fighting near the waterfront that started when the militiamen stormed the densely populated neighborhood in the eastern delta's main city — the latest example of rising anarchy there.

The well-known local militia is one of many armed groups in the delta that are sponsored by politicians, although this one has fallen out with the political leadership of the state and now skirmishes with security forces.

There was no immediate comment from local authorities.

There was confusion over

whether the leader the militia were trying to free actually had been arrested.

Some security sources said he had, but police said the man, who escaped from jail in 2005, had in fact not been detained and his whereabouts were unknown.

"We were in church when we heard shooting everywhere," said one resident, who did not wish to be named.

"We saw people running helter-skelter. We can still hear gunshots now. We saw men in military uniform and police and some people running away," he said.

Residents said later the militiamen set fire to the main police station in the area.

Crime and militancy are worsening in the Niger Delta, where 38 foreigners are being held hostage by different armed groups. A Dutch oil worker was among three people killed on January 16 in a suspected armed robbery in another part of the delta.

A Belgian man working for a building materials company

died of gunshot wounds on Saturday evening in Warri, in the western delta, after two gunmen ambushed him, police said on Sunday.

Police arrested his Nigerian girlfriend and driver on suspicion they hired the killers so they could keep the victim's property.

The vast wetlands region accounts for all oil production from Nigeria, the world's eighth biggest exporter, and violence has surged in the past 12 months. A fifth of oil output has been shut down since a series of militant attacks last February.

The armed forces are unable to control the delta's maze of mangrove-lined creeks and major cities such as Port Harcourt and Warri have also suffered from unrest.

Poverty fuels crime and militancy in the delta's neglected towns and villages, where people living without electricity or clean water feel cheated out of the oil wealth being pumped from their lands. (Reuters)