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## NEWS

## Soldiers kill 12 militants

From Henry Omu

Nigerian troops killed 12 suspected militants and freed an unspecified number of hostages in a dawn raid on an Italian-operated oil facility in the Niger Delta yesterday, the army said.

Italian oil giant, Eni had said 16 Nigerian oil workers and 11 soldiers were being held hostage at the Ogbainbiri flow station since Sunday, but the army said they found only 11 oil workers there.

"We launched a dawn attack, took over the flow station intact and rescued some hostages. The militants sustained casualties, about 12 of them," Brigadier-General Lawrence Ngubane, who commands the military in the region, told Reuters.

The casualty figure was preliminary, he added, because troops were still "mopping up" in the remote swamp area of Bayelsa state.

A spokesman for Eni subsidiary Agip, which operates the oilfield station, was not immediately available for comment.

There have been conflicting reports about the number of hostages being held on the platform. A company official initially said there were 12, but Eni head-quarters in Italy issued a statement saying there were 27, including 11 soldiers.

One Agip worker drowned trying to escape, local media reported.

Ngubane said there were no soldiers there when his troops attacked and they found only 11 oil workers on the facility. He did not say how many were freed unharmed.

Agip was forced by the invasion to reduce oil output by 37,000 barrels a day and declare force majeure on exports from its Brass terminal, a legal step to exempt the company from its sales contracts.

The closure brings to 711,000 barrels a day the shortage in total Nigerian oil supply disrupted by militant attacks and was a setback to moves by the newly-inaugurated president, Umaru Yar'Adua, to calm tensions in Nigeria's anarchic south.

Activists in the delta had thought the invasion was in response to the killing of eight people in a boat by troops guarding Ogbainbiri flow station on June 12.

The army said the eight were suspected militants who tried to attack the facility, but activists said they were ordinary civilians passing through the area.

Oyeinfie Jonjon, leader of the ethnic activist group Ijaw Youth Council, said the invaders were actually demanding money from the company and were upsetting peace moves with the government.

A court freed former militia leader Mujahid Dokubo-Asari on bail last week, meeting a key demand of armed groups in the delta who have stepped up attacks on oil facilities and kidnapped more than 200 foreign workers since early 2006.

"They wanted financial negotiations. We have just had Asari released and we are working on the release of (former Bayelsa state governor) Alamieyeseigha so if there is any action without reason they will have to face the brunt of the law," Jonjon said.

Meanwhile, the Coalition for Militant Action in the Niger-Delta (COMA), says it is willing to lay down its arms and renounce violence in the Niger-Delta, following the release from detention of Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari by the federal government.

This brings to two, the number of groups operating in the region that have announced a cessation of hostilities against oil companies and their personnel.

The first being the Joint Revolutionary Council, which spokesperson, Cynthia Whyte said last Thursday, that it was announcing a cease fire and therefore stop all further action against oil companies and agents of the government.

Dokubo-Asari has repeatedly said, since being granted bail that he was opposed to hostage-taking for ransom purposes and has pledged to stop the practice by militant groups in the Niger-Delta.

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