

20 Cameroun soldiers die in Bakassi

By Benjamin Auta, with agency report

In the first known eruption of violence on the Bakassi Peninsula since last year's transfer of sovereignty from Nigeria, Cameroonian Army officials said yesterday that twenty of their soldiers were killed during fighting in Bakassi, near the border with Nigeria.

Details of the clash were unclear, but Cameroonian military sources told the BBC that the attackers wore Nigerian military uniforms and that they ambushed a boat. The Nigerian military however denied that it had any hand in the attacks and blamed militants from the volatile Niger Delta region.

Nigeria handed the Bakassi peninsula over to Cameroon more than a year ago in compliance with a ruling by the International Court of Justice [ICJ], and after then United Nations secretary general Kofi Annan worked out a transfer deal.

The Nigerian Army said the raid could have been carried out by the same group of gunmen that had earlier attacked a nearby oil terminal run by Exxon Mobil.

The BBC's Randy Joe Sa'ah in Cameroon says that military sources told him the attackers wore Nigerian military uniforms and attacked a Cameroonian military boat

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President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua (left) with EFCC Chairman Nuhu Ribadu and Senate President David Mark during the 6th Economic Seminar on Crime held in Abuja yesterday.

Pic: Joe Oroye.

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carrying food intended for soldiers on the peninsula. They reportedly killed the Cameroonian soldiers on board and put on their uniforms. They then went to the peninsula and shot and wounded more unsuspecting soldiers before getting away with some military equipment.

The BBC reporter said there was "great surprise" in the region at the incident, as the area has been quiet since the peaceful handover in August 2006.

Reacting to the events in Bakassi yesterday, Nigeria Army spokesman Col USA Giwa-Amu told Daily Trust on telephone that the Nigerian Army was not responsible for the killing of the Cameroonian soldiers as the army has withdrawn from the area since August 2006. The Nigeria Army has no presence in the area at present, he said. "We have withdrawn from the area since August 2006 and we don't have any of our troop stationed in that area," he said.

On the number ofgendarmes that were killed in the incident, Col Giwa-Amu said that the Nigerian authorities can not confirm it because the Cameroonian authorities have not said anything or released any figure on the incident.

"I cannot say anything on

the casualty level because we have not received any report from the Cameroonian authorities on the incident and on our part we are investigating the matter," he added. He also said, "The attack must have been carried out by criminals, pirates or hoodlums, but definitely not by Nigerian soldiers". Giwa-Amu said the army withdrew from Bakassi on Aug. 24, 2006, and "since that time, we have not stepped into that place".

He said that Nigerian troops in the Niger Delta region had been put on the alert because they might be the next target of the hoodlums who attacked Bakassi earlier yesterday.

"We are investigating the incident and will we assist in arresting the perpetrators to bring them to justice," he said. Nigeria's Minister of Foreign Affairs Chief Ojo Maduekwe, also told the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) yesterday that "preliminary investigations showed that Nigerian soldiers have nothing to do with the said attack."

He said, "It is two hasty to blame Nigeria for the attack. We are investigating and we will be happy for any information the Cameroonian authority can give."

He explained that Nigeria was determined to maintain close and cordial relations with Cameroon "that is not

only our neighbour but with which we share brotherly and filial links".

The minister said Nigeria would continue to respect agreements that led to the withdrawal of its troops from Bakassi in 2006 and the World Court judgment delivered at The Hague in October 2002, which ceded the oil-rich peninsula to Cameroon.

The minister pointed out that Nigeria was on its own dealing with non-state actors in the Bakassi issue, and called for careful handling of the issue by both countries.

He said Nigeria's position remained that of regret and condolences, adding that "Nigeria is committed to peace and tranquility with all its neighbours."

There were a series of bloody clashes between Nigeria and Cameroon in the 1990s.

The peninsula had been administered by Nigeria since independence from Britain in 1960. However, Cameroon based its claim of sovereignty over the region on maps dating back to the colonial era and was successful at the International Court of Justice, after a lengthy case. Bakassi juts into the Gulf of Guinea, an area which may contain up to 10% of the world's oil and gas reserves. It is also rich in fish and most locals are fishermen.