

•Released last night •Kill 3, abduct 6 expatriates •8 militants killed

TONY ITA ETIM, *Port Harcourt*, SOPURUCHI ONWUKA, *Lagos* and DENNIS NAKU, *Yenagoa*

UPSURGE of militancy in oil-rich Niger Delta region assumed a worrisome dimension yesterday with the abduction of Mrs. Cecilia Omehia, mother of Rivers State governor-elect, Sir Celestine Omehia by unidentified gunmen.

This is as another militant group struck at Ogoibiri in Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa State killing two naval personnel and a sailor, while kidnapping six expatriate oil workers.

Also, eight militants were feared dead in the clash with Nigerian security personnel, informed sources told *Daily Champion* in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State capital.

Mrs. Omehia was abducted Monday night at her family house in Ubima, Ikwerre local government area of Rivers State.

However, Mrs Omehia was released late last night unconditionally, and she is in sound state of health, according to Emma Okah, Chief Press Secretary to Gov. Peter Odili.

Daily Champion gathered that the incident took place between 9 and 10 pm when the armed men stormed the compound asking for the governor-elect.

Sources said the gunmen who did not make any demand took the woman to an undisclosed location and this has caused panic and fear

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in the community that has been celebrating since their son was declared winner of the April 14 gubernatorial election.

Other sources have claimed that the governor-elect was the target of the kidnappers who trailed him from Port Harcourt to Ubima but his security aides were able to shake off the abductors who in frustration picked his mother.

Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has claimed responsibility for the incident, though speculations were rife that it may be the handiwork of some political opponents who are not happy with the outcome of the governorship election in the state.

Rivers State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Felix Ogbaudu in a telephone interview confirmed the story but did not give details.

Ogbaudu told our correspondent that he would address a press conference today, May 2 on the issue.

The governor-elect was conspicuously absent at the 2007 May Day celebration which took place at the Isaac Boro Park, Port Harcourt.

Explaining the absence of

Militants

Omehia, Governor Peter Odili said it was better for him (Omehia) to be away.

The six expatriate oil workers taken hostage yesterday at Ogoibiri are said to be workers of American oil major, Chevron Nigeria Limited and were abducted about 4am at the company's facility located on the high sea off the Atlantic coast of the Nun River.

The names of the hostages are Raffele Pascario, Alfonso Frawza, Ignazio Gugliota, Mario Celetano all Italians; while John Stapleton hails from America and a Croatian, Mr. Juricha Ruic.

Daily Champion gathered that the youths numbering over 25 had stormed the company's platform in three speed boats, during which an initial attempt by them to gain entry into a vessel housing the oil workers was resisted by soldiers on guard.

Further investigations however revealed that the militants later overpowered the soldiers believed to be members of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) in a shoot out during which a Nigerian sailor (names withheld) in the employ of Chevron was gunned down, while the six expatriates were whisked away.