

# Four naval officers die in clash with militants

**A** CLASH between officials of the joint military/police security team and militants in Okerenkoko in Warri South West Local Council of Delta State has left four naval officers dead.

The victims were attached to the Joint Task Force (JTF) code-named "Operation Restore Hope" in the state.

Military authorities in the state yesterday confirmed the death of the officers, who were identified as a naval officer and three ratings. They were said to be killed during a gun-battle with the militants on Wednesday evening while escorting fuel vessels belonging to a major oil company.

The incident coincided with the visit of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Lt.-Gen. Andrew Azazi, who was on a working tour of some states in the Niger Delta.

The Federal Government yesterday took another major step in its fresh drive to develop the oil-producing states by setting up a committee to evolve modalities for providing more houses and a clean environment for the people of the Niger Delta.

The panel named the National Technical Committee on Federal Government's Initiative for Housing Development for the Coastal States of the Niger Delta Region

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has as its members commissioners, traditional rulers, housing experts and other stakeholders. The 20-man group is expected to come out with its report by mid-September while the interim report would be presented to the Ministry of Housing on August 14.

On the troops' clash with the militants, *The Guardian* learnt that armed fighters in a convoy of boats attacked the vessels conveying supplies for the oil firm to offshore locations in the Escravos area during which the naval personnel were killed. Several other soldiers, 18 of the militants and 20 villagers at the scene of the confrontation were said to have sustained various degrees of injuries.

There were however contradictory accounts of how the feud began. The Commander of the JTF, Brig. Gen. Alfred Ilogho, told *The Guardian* yesterday that the Ijaw militants attacked the convoy of vessels being escorted by his men at Okerenkoko and killed the naval personnel, wounding others. "My command suffered casualty in the incident because I lost a naval officer and three ratings", Ilogho said.

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But the spokesman of the Ijaw Youth Leadership Forum, Kingsley Kuku, said: "Men of the Nigerian military launched premeditated attacks on Ijaw communities in Gbaramatu kingdom ...helpless Ijaw traders and fishermen, women and children were bewildered by unwarranted shelling by gunships and boats belonging to the Army, wherein over 20 innocent Ijaw were injured."

But a military source branded Kuku a propagandist that specialises in discrediting the troops through unsubstantiated claims for personal gains.

Lt-Gen. Azazi was said to have quickly intervened in the fracas and urged his men to tread softly so that the situation would not degenerate to a full-blown crisis.

It was learnt that the affected firm's products have all been abandoned at the scene of the gun-battle, including gunboats belonging to the Navy and the Army.

Meanwhile, a naval officer,

Commander Francis Niyi Kolawole, who was killed by militants last June 7 at Cawthorne Channel River in Port Harcourt, will be buried tomorrow at Military Cemetery, Aba Road, Igwuruta, the Nigeria Navy has said.

A statement signed by Director of Naval Information, O.C Medani, described the late Kolawole as a brave officer who demonstrated an uncommon display of courage even at the expense of paying with his life. The Navy said the late officer's show of courage while defending his fatherland is a perfect display of exemplary quality that stands out Commander Kolawole as a committed officer.

The statement read in part: "The Nigeria Navy will on Saturday, July 15, 2006, bury the remains of Commander Francis Niyi Kolawole who was killed in active service by restive militants of Niger Delta, at Cawthorne Channel River, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State on 7th June, 2006. In the attack that resulted in his death with four other

ratings and two civilians, the late Kolawole displayed outstanding bravery. He was killed while courageously and gallantly defending some foreign oil workers and a gas plant that was being attacked by militants. Commander Kolawole refused to give up the gas plant to the militants or abandon the foreign oil workers and despite overwhelming odds fought to the very last man," it said.

The Navy added that there would be a service of songs today at Kolawole's residence in Naval Officers Quarters, Woji, Port Harcourt.

While inaugurating the committee in Abuja, the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, Dr. Olusegun Mimiko, reiterated the readiness of the government to expedite action on the plan to create a conducive living environment for the people of the region.

He stressed that the terms of reference would afford the panel a clear framework for a housing development programme in the short, medium and long term for the coastal states.

His words: "...The recent interactive session held in Port Harcourt, Rivers State enabled stakeholders and representatives of the people to bare their minds on the myriad of problems facing the Niger Delta with regard to housing, especially in the oil and gas-bearing communities.

"It is not too much to repeat again that Mr. President is highly desirous of changing the landscape of the degraded communities of the Niger Delta while empowering them in a sustainable way, to keep their environment in a decent, liveable condition, thereafter. Also to use housing provision to address their seemingly intractable socio-economic problem."

The chairman of the committee, Mr. Fortune Ebie, who pledged its commitment to the task, said the initiative bothered on the lives of those living in the immediate neighbourhood where oil and gas is produced.

He stressed that the project was meant for those in the mangrove swamps and creeks. "It is a programme

for those who are suffering from the adverse effects of oil production- a programme for those whose waters and creeks have been polluted by oil spillage and gas flaring," he added.

The committee's terms of reference include the determination of the communities in the coastal states to benefit from the intervention programme;

- determine the housing needs (type and number) for each state and possibly, community in the region;
- determine the construction materials and the method of construction best suited to each state and where possible, communities;
- determine the collaborative roles that recognised estate developers are to play in partnership with state and local governments;
- determine the roles to be played by the federal, state and local governments as well as communities in this intervention on housing development; and
- draw up a short-term, medium and long-term programmes of intervention for this housing development.