

Tension In Niger Delta

THE latest resolve by the Federal Government to unleash its military might on errant youths in the Niger Delta, might have fired up hostility of the youths, thus heightening tension in the region.

Various youth organisations were reported to be holding consultations across the region at the weekend. The meetings were reportedly prompted by the killing, last

- Residents Fear Soldiers, Militants Clash
- SSS Locates Kidnapped Lebanese
- Reps To Meet Obasanjo Over Fund For Navy

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week, of 15 Ijaw youths and two chiefs by soldiers.

The youths were said to have been returning from where they had gone to negotiate the

release of a Shell worker, who had been kidnapped by some militants.

The Guardian learnt that Delta State government officials were yesterday holding meetings

with representatives of the various youths and community associations as well as leaders of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF).

This was "to prevent

any possible outbreak of clashes between the youths and the armed soldiers that had invaded the region," a source said last night.

Also, following the

reported killing of a soldier on Friday in the Rumuolumeni area of Port Harcourt, residents of the community are reported to have continued fleeing for fear of reprisal attacks by soldiers.

Armed youths in military uniform reportedly stormed a relaxation centre in the Rumuolumeni area of the city and seized two Italian staff of Saipem.

It was in the process of

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Youths Killed In Error, Say Ijaw Council

FROM CHIDO OKAFOR (WARRI)

THE Ijaw Youths Leadership Forum has admitted that last week's killing of 15 Ijaw youth negotiators and two chiefs by soldiers of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in the Niger Delta was in grave error.

According to the spokesman of the youth leaders, Mr. Kingsley Kuku, "the soldiers mistook the occupants of the two boats for militants and instantly opened fire and when the guns stopped, almost all the passengers in the two boats were dead."

The Forum, an

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Oil Majors Deny Withdrawal Reports

BY MARCEL MBAMALU AND EMMA EKE

OIL companies operating in the delta region have expressed their resolve to continue operations despite increased cases of kidnapping and hostage taking.

There have been speculations that some of the oil companies were perfecting plans to relocate their headquarters.

But the Deputy Managing Director of Agip Oil, Akin Aruwajoye, said though

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Separate scenarios from the Niger Delta... recently

Abuja Family Died Of Rat Poison, Says NAFDAC

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"When we noticed that the husband, who normally leaves the compound early for work, had not come out even though the rain had stopped, we thought something was wrong," he said.

"We, the neighbours, decided to break the door leading to the family's room only to discover the lifeless bodies of the man, his wife and their children on the floor."

Shehu said the only hunch as to what killed the Dausas was the pot of rice and beans the neighbours found on entering the house, stating that the piece of evidence had been turned over to the police.

FCT Police Commissioner, Lawrence Alobi, who confirmed the incident, said his men were already working with medical officials of the Asokoro Hospital to ascertain the cause of the death.

NAFDAC at the weekend recounted the occurrence in a statement made available to *The Guardian*, which reads in part:

"It will be recalled that a family of five died at Kobi Village at the outskirts of FCT, Abuja on the night of August 22, 2006. The following day, NAFDAC collected from the victims' one-room abode, a left-over bucket of *kunu*, a pot of herbal medicine, a pot of water, and all raw food items for analysis.

"We also collected for analysis the water from the nearby stream. Later in the day, we collected rice and beans porridge from the police.

"The results of the tests were released from our laboratory at 8pm on the 25th of August 2006.

"The only food item collected, which showed toxicity, was *kunu*. *Dichlorvos* was detected in the *kunu*. This chemical — *Dichlorvos* — is an active ingredient of 'Otapia', a popular rat poison in Nigeria.

"The *kunu* contains 140mg per kg of *Dichlorvos*, while the quantity of this poison required to kill laboratory rats is 50mg per kg. This means that about one-third of the dose, which the family must have drunk in the *kunu*, is enough to kill laboratory animals."

NAFDAC appealed to all Nigerians "to stop using this 'Otapia' because the toxicity is too high and dangerous to human life."

Meanwhile, the Phar-

maceutical Manufacturers Group of the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (PMG-MAN) has reacted to the PSN Lagos State pronouncement that drug counterfeiting in Nigeria had not reduced by 80 per cent as claimed by NAFDAC but rather increased by an alarming 150 per cent.

According to PMG-MAN, in a letter of complaint sent to the President of Pharmaceutical Society of Nigeria, "the unpatriotic and malicious statement by the PSN, Lagos State, is embarrassing not just to the industry but to the nation."

In the letter, signed by Joseph Ikemefuna Oduodu, chairman of PMG-MAN, the group said it feels strongly that from the antecedents of PSN Lagos State antagonistic stance on almost all NAFDAC's laudable strategies, "there is need to call them to order as it is obvious that they are bent on destroying where they have not built."

It said: "NAFDAC has tried to be above the passions of the day and the fears and hatred of the moment in carrying out their work to improve and safeguard the health of the nation."

"But in the depth hatred of PSN Lagos State is getting deeper towards extinguishing that singular light that illuminates the business of the Pharmaceutical industry."

The letter asserted that members of PMG-MAN knew where they were before Prof. Dora Akunyili, the director-general of NAFDAC assumed office and where they are today.

It noted that additional 25 new pharmaceutical manufacturing plants had been established since the present management of NAFDAC assumed office and made in Nigeria drugs, which were not accepted in other West African countries, are now fast moving products in these countries.

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umbrella body of all Ijaw youth groups in the Delta, Bayelsa, Ondo, Edo and Rivers States, stated this after an emergency meeting in Warri.

However, their stand is coming amid the resolve of the House of Representatives to meet President Obasanjo soon, to make a case for special funds for the Nigerian Navy, as part of efforts to safeguard the nation's wealth in the Niger Delta region.

Anthony Aziegbemi, chairman of the House committee on Navy, disclosed this to *The Guardian* at a two-day workshop on the challenges of the armed forces, in the protection of the nation's honey pot.

The youth leaders praised the effort of the task force commander, Brig.-Gen. Alfred Ilogho, who, they said, had gone the extra mile to prove that the killings were sheer error and not deliberate.

They urged the Federal Government to end the siege on the Niger Delta by withdrawing the sol-

Youths Killed In Error

diers immediately.

It was learnt that the negotiators were sent to Letugbene in Bayelsa State by the Ijaw leaders, including Chief Edwin Clark, to negotiate the release of a Shell Petroleum Development Company liaison officer, Nelson Ujeya.

Ujeya was kidnapped by some militant youths from the community three weeks ago, to protest alleged non-implementation of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) by Shell.

Kuku stated that after a protracted discussion with the youths of Letugbene, the negotiators secured the release of Ujeya. But while going back in two boats, they ran into a military convoy.

He lamented that the soldiers mistook the occupants of the two boats for militants and instantly opened fire on them.

He blamed President Obasanjo's shoot-at-sight order for the death of the negotiators, stressing that militarisation of the region would compound the situation instead of improving it.

Kuku revealed that the bodies of nine of the killed youths had been recovered and deposited at an undisclosed mortuary.

He said frantic efforts were still on to recover the other bodies, including those of two chiefs from Letugbene community in Bayelsa, who unfortunately rode with the negotiators, and that of the freed Shell staff.

But Shell's External Affairs manager, West Division, Mr. Harriman Isa Oyofa said the company was not aware that a negotiation team was sent to Letugbene to secure the release of Ujeya, a claim the Ijaw youth leaders had flayed.

However, the leaders have condemned the recent spate of kidnappings in Rivers and Bayelsa States, saying that investigations revealed that the kidnappings were done for monetary rewards and nothing else.

They warned the groups not to destroy the noble agitation for the develop-

ment of the Niger Delta through unwarranted kidnappings, which resulted in the presidential order on shoot-at-sight.

But they warned members of the Joint Task Force to be "more calculative before opening fire on any boat conveying passengers."

Aziegbemi, who gave the synopsis of the issues discussed at the Abuja workshop, noted that if the operations of the Navy were left to the vagaries of annual budgeting, the nation's wealth along the coast and other sensitive areas would suffer.

He put the nation's investment in the Niger Delta region at over \$100 billion, stressing that the Navy requires state-of-the-art equipment to contain the militants in the area.

"We have all agreed that with the way things are going in the Niger Delta, concrete steps must be taken to protect the nation's wealth. And the first step in this direction would be to provide the Navy with the state-of-the-art equipment required to do their job," he said.

He noted that given the requirements of the Navy and the annual budget of the force, it would be difficult to achieve the desired results hence the need for a special fund for the exercise.

But he emphasised the importance of working out a clear operational strategy, to ascertain the actual financial implications before presenting the fund request to President Obasanjo.

"We have also agreed that in addition to the annual budget, we should have a business plan based on a clear strategy," he said.

Aziegbemi also spoke on the mode of the disbursement of the special fund, remarking that it would be split into onshore and offshore for easy management.

He said that the final plan that would be presented to the President would contain the short-term, medium and long-term plans for effectiveness.

Tension Reigns In The Creeks

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trying to abduct the expatriates that the soldier was killed, prompting his colleagues to sack the community.

The whereabouts of the two Italians could not be traced yet, and none of the military groups in the area had claimed responsibility.

The Delta State Security Service (SSS), it was also gathered yesterday, had discovered the whereabouts of a Lebanese, who was kidnapped three weeks ago by some militants.

The Lebanese, Daniel Cowry, was said to be in the custody of a group that called itself Niger Delta Enlightenment and Expe-

dition Force and is being held in the Burutu area.

The militants, according to the SSS sources, were demanding a ransom of N50 million.

Some of the fleeing residents in Port Harcourt had pledged not to return until they got assurance that the soldiers would not unleash anger on

them.

But Army Public Relations Officer, Sagir Musa said there was no reason for the residents to flee the community, assuring that the situation had been brought under control.

In the soldiers' attack on the community, many residents lost their belongings and faced the choice of looking for shelter or sleeping outside in the cold.

No fewer than 150 families lost their homes, a local resident said. Restaurants, beer parlours and other small businesses also lost their goods to the rampaging soldiers, the resident added.

Local residents said the soldiers launched the attack to rout residents they saw as harbouring militants that had been kidnapping expatriate oil workers in Port Harcourt.

But they had denied involvement with the militants, calling on the state government to come to their aid by providing them with succour.

Oil Majors Deny Withdrawal Reports

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his company was seriously concerned over the development, "we have no plans of relocating."

He said Agip Oil had expressed its opinion on the Niger Delta issue following a closed-door meeting the oil companies had with President Obasanjo.

"We are trying to know what is going on because we are concerned and our concern is based on the feelings expressed by our staff over the issue," Aruwajoye said.

Expressing similar opinion, Dozie Arinze of Mobil confirmed that his company was carrying on with normal business despite the latest abductions in the area.

Another official of the company said: "Our major oil exploration is in Akwa Ibom State. From all indications, the people from this area are peace loving, humble. And above all, we, as a corporate citizen, do not shirk our responsibilities to them."

"The communities and us, as a company, know that it

plays both parties to be at peace. To us, peace is paramount and beneficial to our business."

On the possibility of oil firms pulling out of the Niger Delta, the official said, "I do not see that as easily as it is being reported," adding, "even though we are not part of such a move, I know that oil business is not run like that."

The official expressed the hope that "sooner or later, the crises in the Niger Delta would be resolved, for nothing lasts forever."

Officials of Shell declined comment on the issue, though it was learnt that the company had not stopped any of its operations in the past few weeks.

Also Chevron officials said that they nursed no plan of pulling out of their operations in the delta region.

Minister of State for Petroleum, Edmund Daukoru, had, in an interview, assured that the crises in the delta was only a "passing" phase.

President of the Move-

ment for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ledum Mitee, said though his organisation abhors the spate of kidnappings carried out by a section of the youths in the delta, the Federal Government was wrong in ordering armed soldiers to tackle the youths.

Environmental lawyer and former Bayelsa State Commissioner for Information and Strategy, Orono Douglas said kidnapping and militarisation are not the solutions to the raging crises in the delta region.

"The solution lies in dialogue and negotiation," he emphasised.

But President of the Ijaw National Congress, Prof. Kimse Okoko appealed to the youths to shun violence and let the various initiatives towards peace in the region to the tested.

He also asked the government to withdraw the "shoot-at-sight" order it gave recently to members of the Joint Military Task Force in the Niger Delta.

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