

Ateke Tom's suspected deputy killed, militants free Italian hostages

THE guns boomed once again in Okrika, Rivers State on Wednesday night in fresh fighting between security operatives and suspected Niger Delta militants.

By the time the dust settled, a man believed to be the deputy of wanted Ateke Tom lay dead. His name was, however, not given by the security operatives who have also cordoned off the riverine community to prevent the escape of the militants.

Yesterday, another group of militants, the Movement for the Eman-

*From Kelvin Ebiri,
Port Harcourt*

icipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) announced the release of two Italian hostages who are on the staff of the Nigerian Agip Oil company.

Their names were given as Cosma Russo and Franio Arena. The two were abducted 98 days ago.

Ateke Tom's group, the Niger Delta Vigilantes, has been lined with several violent attacks on oil

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Hostages regain freedom

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installations in the Niger Delta region.

In the Wednesday clash with officers of the Joint Task Force (JTF), which comprises men of the Army, Navy, Police and State Security Services (SSS), several other members of the militant group were reportedly arrested.

Okrika is considered a major flash point in the strife-torn creeks and villages of Rivers State.

The Information Officer of the 2nd Amphibious Brigade, Major Musa Sajir, told *The Guardian* in Port Harcourt that some militants had without provocation launched a fierce attack against men of the JTF stationed in Okrika.

In the heat of the gun duel,

the men of the JTF called for reinforcement to enable them aggressively counter the militants whose leader has been on the run since the JTF declared him wanted last year in connection with the series of kidnappings and bank robberies in the state.

Sajir explained: "Okrika is one of the flash-points in Rivers State and the stronghold of Ateke Tom. So we have a permanent patrol team inside Okrika and its environs. They were attacked and they called for reinforcement. More men were deployed swiftly and they were able to repel the militants."

He said Tom's second in command was killed during a gun duel with the JTF. This fact was corroborated by Tom who has been in hiding since September 2006.

The 2nd Amphibious Brigade spokesperson said the whole of Okrika and its environs had been cordoned off by soldiers whose exact number he declined to reveal. According to him, "the JTF is carrying out what we call 'cordon and search operation'. Having attacked our men deliberately, we are resolved to rid the community of these hoodlums once and for all."

He explained that the operation was aimed at ridding Okrika of Tom's boys, and lethal weapons being used by the militias.

A source in the Rivers State Police Command, yesterday disclosed to *The Guardian* that intelligence report indicated that Tom's men were behind Monday's attack on a Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) boat traveling from Port Harcourt to Bonny, during which two policemen were killed.

Yesterday's incursion into Okrika by the JTF is the second in six months. Last September, the JTF raided

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