

Militants kidnap 11 expatriates, free five hostages

YOUTH militancy continued unabated between Wednesday night and yesterday morning in the Niger Delta, resulting in the reported abduction of at least 16 foreign oil workers in Rivers and Bayelsa states.

In Rivers State, the youths killed one soldier and took 11 foreign oil workers hostage. In Bayelsa, another band of militants abducted five expatriates but set free five others.

Yet another set of 12 hostages was also reported in Bayelsa State by the *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)* yesterday.

A power station was

*From Willie Etim (Yenagoa)
and RoseAnn Chikereuba
(Port Harcourt)*

attacked in Afam, Oyigbo Local Council of Rivers State late on Wednesday. The oil facility is being developed by the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC) to increase power supply and reduce gas flaring in the country.

The youths killed one Nigerian soldier and kidnapped 11 foreign oil workers.

The night attack, which lasted till around 1.30 a.m. yesterday, also claimed the life of an indigenous worker, whose name was given as Mr. Austin Azunna

Nwankwo. He hailed from Egberu Ndoki in Oyigbo Local Council Area.

Eyewitnesses told *The Guardian*: "When the militants arrived, they started shooting and bombing the whole place."

The motive of the kidnappers was not immediately known but the spokesman of the Okoloma youth community in Afam, Mr. Stanleyson Akaya, disclosed that the kidnap had been planned long ago, stressing that the militants had written to the company before now on their planned attack.

The Rivers State Police
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Yar'Adua to

Militants sieze five expatriates

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Commissioner, Felix Ogbaudu, said that his men were working hard to find the kidnappers and get the hostages freed.

He said that one of his men was wounded but did not give further details.

For the Joint Task Force (JTF), it vowed yesterday that it would fish out those who killed the soldier and make them to face the law.

The Public Relations Officer of the 2nd Brigade of the Nigerian Army in Port Harcourt and spokesman for the JTF, Major Sagir Musa, told *The Guardian* that although the army would not carry out any reprisal attack, it would look for the killers of the soldier.

Musa said: "Our anger is not against the community but those who killed the soldier.

"We are not an army of occupation but a disciplined one that is dedicated to the protection of the lives and property of Nigerians at all times. Those responsible for taking the life of that soldier must be fished out and made to face the full weight of the law."

The five fresh hostages, who are on the staff of the Nigeria Agip Oil company (NAOC), were seized 40 nautical miles off the coast of Bayelsa State.

Earlier on Wednesday, six expatriate workers were taken hostage and one indigenous sailor killed in the volatile Niger Delta region.

Though the nationalities of the hostages were not known as at press time, *The Guardian* learnt that the five foreigners were abducted at an Italian-operated offshore vessel.

The co-ordinator of the Bayelsa Volunteer Force, a state-owned security outfit who confirmed the report, lamented the alarming

spate of hostage-taking in the Niger Delta. The development, he argued, is becoming embarrassing to the Bayelsa State government and Nigeria in general.

However, the state Commissioner of Police, Julian Okpalake, told *The Guardian* that he was not aware of the fresh hostage incident, but pledged to investigate the report.

The BBC yesterday quoted the militants as disclosing that at least five foreign workers abducted overnight from the Italian-run oil vessel had been released.

But the 12 other workers, kidnapped from a construction site, and a Dutchman taken from a bar in Warri, Delta State, are still being held.

The BBC quoted the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) as saying that it was stepping up attacks in anger at the recent polls.

The country's oil output has dropped as foreigners are frequently kidnapped and over 25 per cent of crude production shut due to the activities of the militants since December 2005.

However, Nigeria's largest foreign oil producer, SPDC says it is preparing to re-start operations in the volatile area.

Shell says that despite the attacks in the Niger Delta and low oil prices, its profits are up.

MEND announced the release of the hostages - abducted from an offshore oil platform operated by Agip in Bayelsa State - yesterday afternoon.

"They have all been released within the last five minutes and are on their way to Port Harcourt," a militant leader, who used the name Jomo

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Gbomo, told Reuters news agency.

The Agence France Presse (AFP) received the same information in an e-mail from MEND, but there was no independent verification of the statement.

In a separate incident, eight Filipinos, three South Koreans and a Nigerian were taken at gunpoint from the Afam power plant 30 kilometres north-east of Port Harcourt.

Daewoo Engineering & Construction said the gunmen stormed the site at 2.00 am and drove off with the workers - including some senior executives.

The company's officials spoke of a 40-minute gun battle with security guards, but gave no details of casualties.

There was an abduction on Tuesday, when six for-

eign workers were kidnapped from an offshore Chevron-run installation.

An unemployed Dutch man was on Wednesday night taken by armed men from a bar in Warri, where he was watching football.

Earlier, MEND claimed responsibility for Tuesday's incident saying in an e-mail statement that their attack was to show their opposition to the President-elect, Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua and his deputy, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.

Yar'Adua won disputed presidential elections last month and is due to be inaugurated at the end of May, when President Olusegun Obasanjo steps down.

"This attack is one in a series intended to embarrass the out-going regime. It is also a warning to the incoming government," the statement said.

Local analysts say many armed gangs were hired

by politicians to help rig the elections and now that the exercise is over, some appear to be getting back to their more traditional business of kidnapping.

But Alex Last of BBC, who is in Lagos, says there is another dimension.

He noted that Nigeria is in a period of transition and that the new government due to take over this month has pledged to find a solution to the crisis in the Niger Delta.

So many armed groups and their local political sponsors want to make sure they are seen as relevant to the success of that peace process, according to Last.

MEND has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks in the Niger Delta, which has seen a 25 per cent drop in output over the past year.

Few foreigners are badly hurt during the kidnappings.