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 THE GUARDIAN

15 feared dead as troops, militants clash in Rivers

- Hostage-takers demand N50m to free Indians

From Kelvin Ebiri (Port Harcourt), Willie Etim (Yenagoa) and Chido Okafor (Warri)

IT was sadness yesterday at the headquarters of the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, when information filtered in that three of the firm's workers were killed during a cross-fire between the military and the militants at the Ogbainbiri Flow-station.

Twelve suspected militants were also said to have been killed in the attack.

Sources in Agip told to The Guardian yesterday that it was still unclear who actually killed the oil workers whose nine colleagues were said to have survived the fierce attack launched by the military to dislodge the militants at the flow-station in Bayelsa State.

A top official of the company, who spoke to The Guardian on condition of anonymity, said the uncertainty of the identity of the killed oil workers plunged the entire Agip headquarters into mourning. "We are worried. We don't know the real identity of who and who is alive or dead. We spoke to some of them yesterday", the source said.

He explained that spouses and relations of the Agip workers held hostage since Sunday came into the company's premises to find out the fate of their loved ones. He said: "It has been difficult for us. We are worried and tense. What do you tell the family of the deceased operation workers? It is a sad day for us."

It was gathered that a military helicopter was dispatched to the Ogbainbiri Flow-station to carry the bodies of the deceased to a morgue in Port Harcourt where most of the Agip workers reside.

The Guardian gathered that the militants had planted dynamites in several parts of the Ogbainbiri Flow-station before yesterday's attack. The militants who were killed were said to be those on-shore. Some of the militants escaped. It was not clear as at press time if there is any military casualty.

The Ogbainbiri hostage crisis first turned tragic Tuesday when a staff of Agip in attempt to escape from the militants got drowned in the rivers.

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In a dawn raid, soldiers attached to the Joint Task Force (JTF) stormed the Ogbainbiri Flow-station of the NAOC, that had been seized by militant youths in the last two weeks, dislodged and recovered both the flow-station and the hostages that were held there.

It was reported that although the soldiers overpowered the militants in the gun-battle that lasted for about 45 minutes, casualties were recorded from both sides.

The Army Public Relations Officer of JTF based in Warri, Major Male Ochaguwuba, who confirmed the report of the military operation, told The Guardian that in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, 12 of the militants were killed in the operation.

Ochaguwuba however declined to comment on the number of soldiers that were killed in the operation.

Unconfirmed reports informed that some military personnel lost their lives during the attack.

Many of the casualties were said to be among the workers and the few soldiers that were held captive by the militants before the operation.

The operation, according to a security source in Yenagoa, was most successful as the military accomplished the mission of dislodging the militants, rescuing the hostages and recovering the flow-station.

Some persons, who had fled the Ogbainbiri in the wake of the attack, have complained about a rumour of another attack in Yenagoa, the Bayelsa State capital.

Their grouse, according to a community source, is with the state governor, Chief Timipre Sylva, who they alleged disappointed them because, after co-operating with him to release the hostages, he allowed the Federal Government to invade the Ogbainbiri community where the hostages were held.

Meanwhile, the unknown militants who kidnapped two Indians working for J.K. Industries last Friday at Sapele, Delta State, have demanded for N50 million ransom to release the hostages.

The Secretary to the Delta Waterways Security Committee, Mr. O. P. Origho, said in a statement that the committee sent a delegation early in the week to the camp of the militants and had been discussing with the suspected captors.

The Guardian learnt that the militants initially demanded N50 million ransom before they would let go the Indians but reduced the ransom to N12 million when the delegation turned down the offer and returned to Warri to brief the Chairman of the committee, Mr. George Timinimi.

The committee had on Monday claimed it had clue on the

identity of the kidnap gang and that a delegation met with the militants in their camp to discuss the release of the two hostages identified as Murughan Gopal and Anthony Marian.

The militants also demanded the release of two of their members arrested by the JTF in connection with the kidnap as well as a Passat car, which they used for the operation but has been impounded by security agents.

The committee is said to be studying the conditions given by the militants for the release of the captives.

The two suspects, one of them a captain of a speedboat, denied any link with the kidnappers but the request for their freedom by the militants has implicated them as accomplices.

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