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Militants abduct five expatriates in Rivers

From Kelvin Ebiri, Port Harcourt

MILITANTS in the early hours of yesterday attacked an oil-drilling rig at Soku in Akuku-Toru Local Council Area of Rivers State and abducted five expatriates. A policeman was reportedly killed in the attack.

The expatriates are Jason Lane, an Australian; Andreas Gamba, a Venezuelan; Georges Saliba, a Lebanese and Bruce Klenner and Gorttard Brend, both New Zealanders. All the kidnapped expatriates work for an oil service firm, Lonestar, based in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital.

Meanwhile, the Rivers State Governor, Celestine Omehia, has solicited the co-operation of traditional rulers in the state in the fight against criminal activities.

Lonestar is drilling for Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). A security source disclosed to The Guardian that the militants stormed the rig at about 5.00 a.m. yesterday and shot their way through to the oil facility.

According to the source, "The militants arrived at the oil facility in several speedboats and were shooting sporadically. They overwhelmed the security men and everybody on the drilling rig. I cannot confirm if anyone was killed. The situation is still hazy."

A Shell spokesperson, Mr. Precious Okolobo, confirmed the incident.

The Joint Task Force has been deployed to the area to beef up security and forestall further attacks in the area. Soku is host to several Shell oil and gas facilities.

No group has claimed responsibility for yesterday's kidnapping, which is coming shortly after the main militants group in the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), declared an

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end to the one-month truce it announced recently. The group has, however, dissociated itself from the new incident.

Soldiers were also deployed to Onne area of Rivers State yesterday to search for about seven missing naval officers whose patrol boat was attacked last Monday night by men of the Niger Delta Vigilante Group headed by Ateke Tom.

Declaring open the 70th Quarterly meeting of Traditional Rulers in the state, Omehia urged them to identify perpetrators of the acts since, according to him, they live within the communities.

The governor described hostage-taking and other criminal activities by militant operating in the state as not only painful and shameful but also inimical to the economic growth of the state.

He asserted that abduction of foreigners was no longer the struggle for the liberation of the Niger Delta. He insisted that diplomacy remained the best approach towards achieving the objectives of the struggle.

The governor sadly observed that one of the grave consequences of the act was the abandonment of ongoing projects, and therefore enjoined the people to join hands in ensuring that terrorist activities were brought to an end in the state.

Omehia said within the period his administration came on board, it had made efforts to embark on projects that would touch the lives of the ordinary people in the state in line with the five-point programme presented to the electorate.

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