

Manhunt for Rivers' militia members begins

- Troops quiz leader's mum
- Begin house-to-house search

A MAJOR military crackdown has begun on the cult members who last week literally seized Port Harcourt, Rivers State, by the throat.

In a raid, carried out in the wee hours of yesterday, officers of the Joint Task Force JTF in the state, stormed the homes of the suspected ring leaders of the cult members who have killed about 30 persons in an orgy of violence.

Members of the task force conducted a house-to-house search of the gang leaders between 2.00 a.m. and 3.30 a.m. yesterday. One of the raided houses was No. 2, Afikpo Street, at Mile 1, Diobu area of the state capital.

They quizzed several residents on the whereabouts of the suspected militia members, including the mother of one of the rival gang's leaders.

But the state government believes that the latest action of the task force ought to have come much earlier. The state's Information Commission, Mr. Emma Okah, at a press conference in Lagos said that the carnage would have been reduced if the security authorities had acted

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more decisively.

Okah queried: "Where is the military? Where are the various security agencies?"

The state's spokesman added: "They have burnt down Radio Rivers Station. They have burnt down NNPC mega filling station. They shoot their guns right in front of the Police Headquarters walking, not running."

He urged the Federal Government not to treat the crisis as an internal affair of Rivers State.

Security sources told *The Guardian* that the raid was in compliance with the directives from the Presidency that peace must be restored in Port Harcourt soonest.

The Acting Inspector-General of Police, Mike Okiro, had on Saturday told journalists at the headquarters of the JTF in Port Harcourt that the "major clampdown" would begin immediately. He spoke after a security meeting attended by the Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Andrew Azazi, the Brigade Com-

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Task force hunts for Rivers' militia members

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mander, 2nd Amphibious Brigade, Brig.-Gen., Samuel Sanusi, the Rivers State Commissioner of Police, Phelix Ogbaudu, Rivers Director of the State Security Service (SSS), Adeola Ajayi; and other security officers, that a major manhunt and clampdown would begin immediately.

Residents of Diobu told *The Guardian* that members of the task force stormed some streets in the area in search of hoodlums responsible for the shootings, killings and the creation of lawlessness in the state last week.

Intelligence report had revealed that one of the kingpins of one of the rival groups lives on Afikpo Street. Eyewitnesses said the raid was carried out by over 30 soldiers.

Eyewitnesses said the doors to the houses of panic-stricken residents who failed to open their doors were broken. *The Guardian* learnt that while the search was going on, the gang leader slipped through the window and escaped. The JTF made some arrests while the mother of the gang leader was quizzed.

Ogbaudu confirmed the raid. Similar operations were carried out around Lumumba Street and other suspected hide-outs of the suspects.

But Okah in Lagos deplored the "lackadaisical attitude" of security operatives to the high incidence of cult violence in the state.

He said that the genesis of the endemic violence in the state is the "dirty business of oil bunkering" where rival militants are

at each others' throat to control the "lucrative business." He expressed concern that the Federal Government was not putting enough stringent measures to check those channels in the creeks and waterways, which the militants employ as their route to meet with their partners in the illicit oil trade.

Most worrisome, he said, is the exchange of guns for oil, which he said, had now become the focus of the militants. He said that if the channels were cut-off, half of the problems in the Niger Delta would be solved. He argued that the militants were not freedom fighters but criminals who had threatened the government of Celestine Omehia. Okah said that the militants had vowed to make the state ungovernable until the new governor "resumes the periodical 'settlements' and payment of ransom in exchange for kidnapped hostages, which was the norm before the coming of Omehia's administration."

While declaring that the River State government would not succumb to threats and blackmail from the militants, Okah said that the state government had bought three Armoured Personnel Carrier (APCs) and three bullet-proof fast attacking boats, one of which was recently destroyed by the militants.

According to him, the defence by the security agencies that a frontal engagement with the mil-

itants would endanger lives and property "is lame" as civilian lives and property are already casualties of the lingering violence in the oil-rich state.

For now, he said: "There is little the Rivers State government can do, as there is nothing we have not done. The Federal Government must intervene."

On calls for a state of emergency in Rivers, Okah accused advocates as patrons of the militants who want a return to the *status-quo* when money was being paid to them to solicit their "co-operation." This, he said, the government would not do "as we don't have money to give to criminals." He also expressed the fears of the government of Rivers State that if the present crisis is left unattended to, "there can not be any reasonable social and economic development in the state."

He also called for the introduction of a special force adequately trained for the unique, sophisticated crimes and security challenges that are taking place not only in the state but across the Niger Delta region. According to Okah, this is one of the ways to make the state regain its glory as one of the safest for business of oil and gas.

Okah in another interview with *The Guardian* yesterday restated the capacity of the state government in bringing the violence under control. He called the champions of emergency rule as disgruntled politicians who would stop at nothing to obtain what

the people or the tribunal could not give to them. He also expressed the confidence of the government on the competence of the present Commissioner of Police, the Director of the SSS and the co-ordinator of the JFF, in addressing the security lapses and violence.

Speaking on the issue yesterday, Okah said the present disturbances were caused by the activities of two rival cult groups whose members are struggling for bunkering territories. "One felt the other had out-stepped its bounds and the crisis erupted", Okah said.

He said while it is gratifying that the Acting Inspector-General of Police has condemned the calls for emergency rule in the state, one of the solutions might be the deployment of a special force that would complement the activities of the regular police in the task of policing the state and bringing the cult activities in the state under control.

He said it was worrisome that youths in the state now find it convenient to brandish sophisticated guns and other ammunition in broad day light all days of the week. "It is no longer news that many youths these days would just be shooting sporadically into the air and these people go about the brazen display of these weapons without any fear of arrest from the security operatives. "This is a major concern for all stakeholders who knew the place of Rivers as the hub of the oil and gas business not only for the nation but the entire West African sub-region", he added.

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