

Gangs unleash mayhem in Rivers

- Kill three chiefs

From Kelvin Ebiri, RoseAnn Chikereuba (Port Harcourt) and Chido Okafor (Warri)

THE sleepy Ogbogoro community in the Obio Local Council of Rivers State was yesterday thrown into turmoil by suspected cult members in a reign of terror. At the time the dust settled, three chiefs were feared dead while seven houses were destroyed.

The Chief of Army Staff, Lt.-Gen. Luka Nyeh Yusuf, and his Air Force counterpart, Air Marshal Paul Dike, yesterday in Warri pledged to end youths' restiveness in the entire Niger Delta.

Guns boomed at Ogbogoro, where suspected cult members were reported to have visited with vengeance following the community's bid to cleanse itself of violent members.

An eyewitness who pleaded anonymity disclosed to The Guardian that Ogbogoro chiefs and some youths conducted a spiritual cleansing of the community on Wednesday and asked the local gods to kill gang members who failed to renounce their membership and violence.

Shortly after, the chiefs and other community leaders went round the village and directed suspected gang members to proceed on exile or risk being handed over to security operatives.

The source said: "After the cleansing, security agents came and actually arrested some of the gang members who failed to renounce violence or leave Ogbogoro as directed by the chiefs and various stakeholders."

Though the number of those arrested could not be ascertained, it was learnt that the Deebam gang members who had been on the run, quickly went and mobilised their other colleagues from neighbouring villages and attacked the village yesterday afternoon.

The Guardian learnt that scores of gunmen stormed the Ogbogoro Civic Centre where some chiefs were meeting on how to rid the community of miscreants. The gunmen were said to have shot dead two of them. Several other persons were macheted.

One of the chiefs, who was identified as Harrison, was attacked and shot dead in his home. The marauding gunmen also destroyed several houses during the siege that lasted till late afternoon. It was feared that the chairman of the chiefs' council was kidnapped by the gunmen and taken away.

Following the violence, thousands of Ogbogoro indigenes were forced to flee their homes.

The Rivers State Commissioner of Police, Phelix Ogbaudu, confirmed the incident and said some anti-riot policemen had been deployed in the area to restore law and order. He, however, did not confirm the number of casualties.

Meanwhile, the chiefs of Eweh community in the state have urged the government to prosecute the leaders of any community that provide cover for wanted gang members.

Addressing journalists yesterday in Port Harcourt, the Eweh chief, Mene Benedict Tebirawa, expressed grief over the spate of violence perpetrated by the youths three weeks ago in Port Harcourt.

He said: "We as traditional rulers and custodians of people's heritage strongly condemn violence. It was a shameful thing to see our youths challenging the state and Federal Government of Nigeria; it is indeed foolishness of the highest order for the rampaging cultists to lay siege to Port Harcourt, the once peaceful city of the Niger Delta."

Tebirawa, who lauded the efforts of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua and the Rivers State Governor, Mr. Celestine Omehia for responding swiftly to the crisis, called on the youths to desist from senseless violence which he said could only retard development.

The service chiefs who said they were visiting the Niger Delta to have a feel of the real situation on ground to enable them make good decisions, urged the militants to sheath their swords so that development which had been lacking in the area could flow in.

Yusuf, who addressed reporters at the Headquarters of the Joint Task Force (JTF), said their visit was not connected with what was going on in Rivers State but purely a fact-finding mission.

He said their assessment of the JTF was that it was doing the job for which it was set up. He explained that the JTF was an additional security measure fashioned by the Federal Government to maintain peace in the Niger Delta.

He said that the JTF would be disbanded if the governors of the Niger Delta states who are the chief security officers of their states, said peace had returned and their (JTF) services were no longer needed.

"Don't forget that the JTF is an additional measure to improve the security already in place in the states. Once the governors who are directly in charge of these areas say they are satisfied with the level of security in the Niger Delta, the Federal Government would disband the JTF," he added

He said: "My message to the militants is that they should understand that Nigeria is at a crucial stage of development and their activities would deter the economic and social progress of the country."

Yusuf reassured that there would soon be lasting peace in the region when the Federal Government begins to unfold the development package it had for the Niger Delta.