

MEND claims killing 11 soldiers, Army denies

THE Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) yesterday claimed to have killed 11 soldiers during an attack on a Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) facility in Rivers State.

However, the Army has refuted the claim.

Shell, which yesterday morning disclosed that it was losing over 30,000 barrels of crude oil per day valued at N409 million through oil theft in the Niger Delta, confirmed the attack along the Nembe Creek pipeline.

MEND spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, said heavily armed militants backed by detonation engineers at about 1.00 a.m. yesterday sabotaged another major trunk pipeline at Awoba Flow Station in Degema Local Council of Rivers State, belonging to the SPDC.

Gbomo said: "Minutes after the sabotage, our fighters encountered a military gunboat which opened fire blindly on the advance guard. We flanked them in a counter-attack and killed in close combat all the drunken soldiers numbering 11, collecting their weapons, ammunition and bullet-proof vests before using dynamite to sink the gunboat with its dead occupants."

He alleged that two traumatised adolescent girls found in the company of the soldiers were hurt, not from the skirmish, but from gang rape by the soldiers.

According to him, the girls

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Port Harcourt*

were dropped off in a neighbouring village by MEND fighters who have since returned safely to camp.

"Today's attack is dedicated to the administration of Umaru Yar'Adua and Goodluck Jonathan who have failed after one year in office to ensure peace, security and reconciliation in the Niger Delta region," Gbomo said.

Spokesperson of the Joint Task Force (JTF) Operation Flush Out III, Lt. Col. Sagir Musa, who confirmed the attack on the pipeline, has, however, denied the allegation that 11 soldiers were killed by the militants.

Musa told *The Guardian* that when the attack occurred, the Awoba area was not guarded by security agencies, hence dismissed MEND's claims as mere propaganda.

He said a report at the disposal of the JTF indicated that a rise at Awoba flow station in Degema Local Council, specifically at Ekulama and Nembe axis, exploded in the early hours of yesterday.

"The area/flowstation is not guarded by armed men. Therefore, the purported MEND report claiming responsibility for killing 11 soldiers is not only a lie, but pure propaganda, dubious and bunkum," Musa said.

The JTF spokesman said there was no encounter between the militants and soldiers in the area. He strongly questioned the veracity of the claim that soldiers were killed.