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Tuesday, July 29, 2008

Yar'Adua tasks Cameroun on security in Gulf of Guinea

From Madu Onuorah (Abuja) and Anietie Akpan (Calabar)

PRESIDENT Umaru Musa Yar'Adua yesterday called on his Camerounian counterpart, Paul Biya, to join Nigeria to play major roles in the establishment of structures that would safeguard the people and resources of the Gulf of Guinea.

The President also restated his commitment to the successful conclusion of the August 14 handover of the Bakassi Peninsula to Cameroun, an area with about four million Nigerian inhabitants.

He also urged extensive discussions with Camerounian officials to ensure a hitch-free hand-over.

Yar'Adua spoke amid claims that militants were flocking into Bakassi to declare the peninsula an independent entity as fighting raged between them and Camerounian troops.

The President spoke when he received Mr. Henri Eyebe Ayissi, Cameroun's Minister of External Relations, who brought a special message from Biya at the Presidential Villa in Abuja. He said: "As major stakeholders in the area, we have a joint responsibility to ensure that we take a leading role in the establishment of structures and a force to safeguard our people and resources towards a collective security of the Gulf of Guinea.

"I am pleased that Nigeria and Cameroun are committed to the Green Tree Agreement, and see it as a watershed to deeper economic, social, military relations. We must work closely together at the Mixed Commission on agreements that need to be signed and implemented in the aftermath of the August 14 handover."

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Foreign Affairs Minister, Chief Ojo Maduekwe, had told journalists immediately after the meeting that Yar'Adua had also directed all relevant agencies to co-operate with their Camerounian counterparts to ensure a hitch-free handover.

Maduekwe said: "Yar'Adua reaffirmed the commitment of the Federal Government to the August 14 deadline and he said that relevant agencies on both sides should co-ordinate efforts to ensure a hitch-free handover. The President said the handover should be a model of how African states can work together in good neighbourliness, and he has assured of his determination to do all he can to make sure that the two countries work together.

"The Camerounian envoy also affirmed the commitment of his government to work closely with Nigeria, and it is a reaffirmation of the political will of both countries to meet regularly and address issues.

"Issues that relate to the welfare of the indigenes would be addressed administratively to ease tensions," he said, and hoped they would be "treated with dignity in accordance with their human rights under law."

He said the Camerounian envoy brought "a message of goodwill, solidarity, friendship and a desire for the continuation of cordial relationship between the two countries."

Maduekwe said the envoy also expressed a commitment to work with Nigeria to fight poverty and in the area of maritime security and the development of oil resources belonging to the two countries.

He added the Nigeria-Cameroun Mixed Commission would continue to meet after the August 14 handover.

Ayissi had conveyed Biya's appreciation for Yar'Adua's involvement in the handing-over and his assurances, and expressed Cameroun's determination to ensure that all Nigerians who choose to stay in Bakassi after August 14 would "enjoy usual hospitality" while those who decide to leave would be assisted.

He also stated his country's desire for Nigeria and Cameroun to "work

hand-in-hand to build confidence and reinforce common security at bilateral and multilateral levels in the Gulf of Guinea."

And with intense fighting between the militants and Camerounian gendarmes, strong indications have emerged that the Bakasi people may soon declare their independence ahead of the August 14 final handover.

In the heat of talks with Cameroun in 2006, the late activist, John Ene, announced a resistance, hoisting a "Bakassi flag" in Abana, headquarters of Bakassi Local Council in an attempt to declare independence, but his move was aborted by the Federal Government.

Last Thursday, militants suspected to be from the Niger Delta were said to have attacked and killed about 24 gendarmes including a French soldier in Ine Nkankure, Ine Iwang and Zion, a few kilometers from Abana in the peninsular.

But last weekend, fleeing indigenes of Bakassi claimed the gendarmes retaliated and killed 21 militants in the disputed area.

No official confirmation of the claims and counter-claims but top government sources in Cross River State disclosed that, "there is serious problem in the area and lives have been lost."

A source in Bakassi said that more of the militants' would arrive the peninsular to frustrate the hand-over but that "if the Federal Government goes ahead to give the place to Cameroun, we shall declare our independence".

Following the fresh fighting, thousands of Nigerians have fled the area and officials at the Bakassi returnees shelter confirmed that a large number of persons from the area have flooded the camp.

But the Nigerians in Bakassi South comprising Abana, Atabong West/East have vowed not move an inch from the peninsular insisting that the Nigerian National Assembly has not ratified the ceding of the area to Cameroun.

Last June, more than 300 Nigerians were declared missing in Bakassi following a clash between suspected militants from Nigeria and the gendarmes.

The Camerounian troops had overrun the entire Northern Bakassi sacking over 50,000 Nigerians living there even ahead of the August 14, 2008 final pull out following an alleged killing of six gendarmes by the militants.

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