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Saturday, August 16, 2008

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[Discussions](#)
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Saturday, August 16, 2008

12 Militants, Naval Officer Die In Clash

◦ Babangida Backs Marshal Plan For Niger Delta

From Kelvin Ebiri, Port Harcourt and John-Abba Ogbodo, Abuja

NAVAL personnel and militants again clashed in Rivers State yesterday.

About 13 casualties were recorded in the offensive allegedly launched on the Naval men in Okirika.

Twelve of the victims were said to be militants while the Navy lost a rating and another officer was wounded.

But in a statement, the Public Relations Officer of NNS PATHFINDER, Wey Olabisi put the death toll at 12. He said all the victims were militants, while two Naval officers were wounded.

Sources, however, said that the Navy lost a rating in the attack.

Olabisi said 12 militants in two speedboats around 3.45p.m engaged naval component of the Joint Task Force (JTF) Operation Flush 11 in a gun battle that left all the militants dead and two naval personnel wounded.

The patrol boat was returning to Naval Base, Port Harcourt when it ran into an ambush of militants at Alakiri near Port Harcourt. The militants allegedly opened fire immediately on the naval personnel, who retaliated in self-defence, leading to the killing of the militants and destruction of their speedboats belonging.

Olabisi said two General Purpose Machine Guns (GPMGs), three AK 47 rifles and 388 rounds of live ammunition were recovered from the armed men.

"The Nigerian Navy is using this opportunity to appeal to other militants to lay down their arms, as issues affecting the Niger Delta are being addressed by both the federal and the state governments," he said.

Also yesterday, former military President, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida said the solution to the lingering crisis in the Niger Delta was massive development based on a Master Plan.

Babangida, who spoke at the 60th birthday celebration of former governor of Rivers State, Dr. Peter Odili said the nation should feel bad about the situation in the Niger Delta, adding that the worse thing about the area was the neglect that led to the entire crisis.

Represented by Ahmadu Mohammed Abubakar at the event, Babangida urged federal government to take up the challenge before it became too late.

"We all feel bad and worried about the wide ranging environmental degradation globally and are particularly concerned about its impact in the Niger Delta. We even feel worse about the neglect that led to the current crisis. I believe that the solution to the problems of the Niger Delta should be a sustained massive development based on a Marshal Plan.

"Such development would reclaim the land, open up the hinterland, clean up the environment, empower the people, physically develop the rural areas and enhance the quality of lives of its peoples. It is crucial that we respond proactively, promptly and honestly to the Niger Delta situation before it is too late. I urge all parties to be sincere about rapprochement and pursue the route of dialogue in the interest of all," he said.

Babangida reiterated that the only way to fix the problem of Niger Delta was to anchor it on an action plan.




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He regretted that Nigeria's story is largely that of failure, but expressed the hope that the nation was back on track, adding that one of the feats achieved by the country was the ability to bring the various tribes together.

The former ruler stressed that his own generation fought for the unity of Nigeria, while the challenge before the present one was to ensure that Nigeria remained peaceful and prosperous.

"Every generation, according to the Marxian scholar, must confront the challenges of its historical epoch. Our founding fathers established a country that we are all proud to call ours. My generation shed blood to keep our country secure and united. The challenge of the present generation is to ensure that this country continues to be peaceful, prosperous and intact for posterity. Unless this is done, I am afraid, Peter, neither you nor any of your colleagues is allowed to join us in retirement," he said.

In his speech, Odili praised President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua for making rule of law a cornerstone of his administration, emphasising that it was the only way to guarantee equity and justice.

"The President struck the right cord when he pronounced rule of law as cornerstone of his administration. It is the foundation of equity and justice. It is the only guarantee for equity between the rich and the poor. For the government to embrace rule of law, it is on the path of destiny. A good dance begins with the first step and his first step is in order," he said.

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