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Tuesday, September 16, 2008

## JTF, MEND clash at Shell's flow-station

◦ Disagree on death toll

*By Yetunde Ebosele (Lagos) and Kelvin Ebiri (Port Harcourt)*

**M**ILITANTS in oil-rich Niger Delta yesterday attacked a Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) gas plant and field logistics base, the Alakiri flow station in Rivers State.

The onslaught carried out by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), The Guardian gathered, left many oil workers injured and some dead.

The attack which is part of MEND's declaration of total "oil war" on government following alleged killing of rebels by the members of the military Joint Task Force (JTF), took place a day after a similar one on Chevron's facilities in Soku and Kula, Rivers State.

Although another militant group, the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) alleged that about 17 to 24 soldiers were killed in the predawn attack, the JTF spokesperson, Lt.-Col. Sagir Musa, described this as untrue and claimed that an unspecified number of militants instead were killed.

He confirmed that militants in about 10 speedboats attacked Alakiri flow station and for about one hour detonated dynamites and bombs but that the soldiers guarding the facility repelled the attack.

With the attack, about 50,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil and 120 million cubic feet of gas have been shut-in at Alakiri.

And as a precautionary measure, SPDC which confirmed the attack said it has down-manned facilities in some field locations in the Niger Delta as it continues to monitor security developments in the region.

Meanwhile, a federal lawmaker representing Degema/Bonny Constituency in the House of Representatives, Dr. Sokonte H. Davies, and a Niger Delta peace activist, Ufuoma C. Usen Jones, have said the resort to the use of military force which has claimed several lives and left several persons injured, to address the situation in the Niger Delta, was ill advised.

MEND spokespersons, Jomo Gbomo said in email to media houses yesterday that its fighters at about 2.00 a.m. yesterday in continuation of the "oil war" declared on Saturday, attacked the Alakiri flow station and set it ablaze.

His words: "At 0200 hrs today, September 15, 2008, Hurricane Barbarossa continued its destructive sweep through Rivers State of Nigeria when the eye of the storm struck a direct hit at the expansive Alakiri flow station complex operated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company. The facility was still burning when we left.

"Heavily armed fighters from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta stormed the facility and have razed it to the ground as promised. The foolhardy workers and soldiers who did not heed our warning perished inside the station. "Resistance was non-existent as the soldiers fled their dug-in positions leaving behind their colleagues and the workers inside the facility to their fate."

MEND reiterated its earlier warning that "international vessels should not come in to load crude oil. Owners of such vessels should be warned that the vessels would suffer the same fate of the Alakiri flow station. Hostages will not be taken. Do not be deceived..."

Shell, in a statement by its spokesperson, Mr. Precious Okolobo, said: "SPDC's Alakiri flow station, gas plant and field logistics base, south-west of Port Harcourt

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were attacked by unknown gunmen early this morning (Monday). Regrettably, a community station guard was killed during the incident. SPDC is saddened by this fatality and our thoughts are with the family of the late station guard. Four other people are being treated for injuries sustained during the incident at the Shell Hospital in Port Harcourt."

Davies has condemned the JTF raid on Elem-Tombia, Bekinkiri and Ogboma, which has in turn led to the declaration of oil war by MEND and other militant groups in the Niger Delta.

The lawmaker said the military has stirred the hornets' nest by the unprovoked onslaught on the communities, and demanded an immediate investigation of the circumstances that led to the attacks and that the perpetrators should be brought to book.

He said: "Presently, it is reported that there are a high number of casualties, especially women and children and several persons are missing while over 15 people have sustained various degrees of injuries. We believe that if this is a strategy to solve the Niger Delta problem, it was ill advised. We hope that the Federal Government will show the necessary will to handle this matter adequately.

"There is no truth, whatsoever, that the people responded by firing back at the military aggressors. This is a blatant lie to cover wickedness. We hope that this will not be another Odi and Saki Biam."

Usen Jones said peace workers "face great risks as they are branded as collaborationists helping an 'occupationist' force".

Similarly, the Tombia Kingdom Press/Watch has appealed to President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua to help restore peace and develop the community.

The president and secretary of the group, Boma Ikiroma and Dabibi Amaimgbu, described as untrue the allegation that Tombia was the hub of gangsters and militancy in the state. They appealed for the construction of roads, schools, electricity and pipe borne water destroyed during the crisis.

The Action Congress (AC) in Rivers State said it was saddened by the renewed clashes between the JTF and the militants particularly now that the Federal Government has demonstrated concerted commitment in resolving the underdevelopment of the region.

AC spokesperson, Eze Chukwuemeka Eze, said a time would come when some of these militant groups, if they continue with these types of antics, may lose the goodwill of the people. He said the fact remains that the people cannot continue to tolerate a situation where investors are scared away in droves, oil installations are destroyed and the lives of the JTF, even that of the militants and the public, are constantly in danger.

He added: "We, therefore, once again call on the government of Rivers State to shift its hard stance on the activities of these militant groups and engage them in a proactive dialogue to find a way out of this unwarranted attack on innocent citizenry of Rivers State and creation of fear among the citizenry. This situation is not only becoming embarrassing to us but also to the entire civilized community of the world."

MEND had issued a 24-hour ultimatum last Saturday ordering oil companies to withdraw their workers from the Niger Delta, saying it had declared an "oil war" against the government following clashes with soldiers last Friday which left scores of militants dead.

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