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Pirates on the prowl again, kill two in Bonny*By Odita Sunday*

THE Merchant Navy Officers Association of Nigeria, an umbrella body of all captains and seafarers on board fishing vessels in the country, said at the weekend that no fewer than 20 of its members had been killed by sea pirates in the last six months.

Consequently, the association said it was warming up to withdraw its ship captains attached to various operational fishing trawlers to protest the upsurge in attack.

The association's President, Captain Thomas Keremerigha, told The Guardian that his association was left with no other option but to recall his men attached to fishing companies pending when government was ready to find a lasting solution to the problem.

"I can confidently tell you that from the point of international conference against piracy we had at Abuja, till now, the fishing industry has lost 20 personnel on board vessels to pirates attacks," he said.

According to him, pirates killed two captains few weeks ago around Bonny offshore area of the country.

"Two weeks ago, there was another piracy attack on a fishing vessel, two Nigerian captains were killed, both of them are still in the mortuary till date.

"Recently, the International Transport Federation declared Niger Delta area a disaster zone. You can even recalled the period when all the trawlers in this country were called back from sea because of the continuous harassment by the militants or pirates as the case may be.

" We were assured 100 per cent by the Nigeria Navy that the issue is under control, but here we are, the killing is taking place every other day, which has proved to us that our territorial waters are not safe," he lamented.

Keremerigha urged government to save the fishing industry from imminent death as it was a major foreign exchange earner to the country.

"The fishing industry is employing a lot of Nigerians, the industry is a foreign exchange earner to this country. From all indication, we have no option than to call all the trawlers back and withdraw our men because they are dieing everyday.

"We cannot open our eyes to see our brothers killing our brothers in the name of Niger Delta struggle, which is far from Niger Delta struggle. They are complete criminals, they are armed robbers to the

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core because when they come, they do not only kill, they loot the company's products, carry electronics gadgets inside the vessels and they have open market for them. We don't know where to go from here than to call all the fishing trawlers back to base."

Countries in West Africa sub-region recently proposed a common coast guard for maritime nations in region. Nigeria is one of the countries that is promoting the regional coast guard expected to be one instrument to halt pirates and their activities in the sub region.

But the Merchant Navy president said the proposed security outfit was unnecessary as he urged the government to solve the safety issues on the Nigeria's waters before joining other nations to solve their own problem.

He said, " what is West Africa coast guard?, We have the highest naval strength in West Africa, the highest army and police strength and we cannot solve our piracy problem in Nigeria, we are going to join West Africa Coast Guard. Let us solve our problem, we have enough materials.

"Let the Navy come out to tell us that they cannot curb piracy, then we seek assistance elsewhere. All other West African countries are looking up to Nigeria, with our military might and resources. So we are not in support of the West Africa Coast Guard."

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