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Sunday, November 16, 2008

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news

JTF arrests 22 Filipinos, kills 2 militants

◦ MEND Threatens Another 'Oil War'

*From Madu Onuorah (Abuja) And
Kelvin Ebiri (Port Harcourt)*

THE Joint Task Force (JTF) Operation Restore Hope yesterday announced the arrest of 22 Filipinos aboard a vessel over illegal bunkering.

It also confirmed that its troops killed two of the militants who attacked its locations in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State.

The news is coming as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has reiterated that any attack on it or its affiliate position by the JTF in the Niger Delta would be tantamount to a declaration of "an oil war."

MEND spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, in an online interview with The Guardian yesterday said the warning not to attack any of their bases had been made in very clear terms "so that the military and the government becomes clear that this is a no-go area."

JTF's Operation Flush Out III in Rivers State last week threatened to unleash unprecedented attack that would have far reaching effect on militants' bases in the state if they did not refrain from attacking JTF's locations.

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The military stern warning came barely 48 hours after the Defence headquarters in Abuja summoned the commanders of the various JTF formations in the Niger Delta to a crucial meeting on Monday.

The Coordinator, Joint Media Campaign Centre, Lt. Col. Rabe Abubakar, said in a statement that the vessel on which the Filipinos were arrested was carrying 12,000 metric tonnes of suspected bunkered oil.

He noted that the vessel was arrested while transiting the Escravos waters in Delta State.

According to him: "The JTF, in an effort to eradicate illegal oil bunkering and other related sabotage activities in the Niger Delta, has yet intercepted and arrested a vessel, MT KUA, carrying 12,000 metric tonnes of suspected bunkered crude oil with 22 Filipinos on board.

"The vessel was arrested while transiting Escravos waters in Delta State. Preliminary investigation conducted on board the ship revealed that the vessel's actual name was MT AKUADA and the product it was conveying was illegal bunkered oil from Bedfut point in Delta State."

Col. Abubakar stated that, "the JTF will continue to apprehend the illegal oil bunkerers wherever they may be operating and whoever is involved. At least we are gradually catching up with the big guns in illegal oil business."

He promised to make available details of the unnamed arrest of "big guns in illegal oil business" as soon as possible.

On the killing of two militants, Col. Abubakar stated that, "militants and their cohorts once again launched an unprovoked attack on the JTF locations at OPUKUSHI and HARBOUR creek checkpoint at Yenagoa in Bayelsa State at about 0200 hours on 14 November, 2008."

"However the attack was successfully repelled using superior firepower by our troops. Two suspected militants were killed while dynamite and its accessories were recovered."

He reiterated, "the JTF commitment in carrying out its statutory duties, taking into consideration the rule of law and due process."

"And at the same time, we warn any group to desist from further unprovoked attacks on our locations or we will uproot the perpetrators, and they will pay for it dearly."

Abubakar condemned such attacks on the JTF locations and warned the militants to embrace peace for the overall development of the oil-rich region, "as the security outfit will not allow lawlessness to prevail in the Niger Delta."

However, the MEND has said that an attack on the militants' camps could not end militant agitation because "we are a guerrilla movement and our existence does not rely on a fixed location."

"Militancy will end when there is justice and true federalism. From the attitude of the dominant tribes that have ruled this country, it will only happen through force," it said.

Reacting to the Rivers State government's gesture to forgive all militants who abandon arms struggle, MEND said: "The Rivers State government is

not those we should dialogue with but the Federal Government on the issue of true federalism, which they are avoiding."

According to MEND's spokesperson, Gbomo, "that statement does not make sense. When you say someone should repent, it means the person has done something wrong. The issue of repentance does not arise because we consider what we are doing as right."

Despite the JTF fierce attack on one of MEND's eastern commanders' base in Rivers State, which culminated in the September one-week so-called oil war, the militant group said it was still firmly on ground in the country's leading oil and gas producing state.

Asked if MEND would assist in curbing acts of criminality by some miscreants that have distorted the Niger Delta struggle, Gbomo said it was important that the group remains focused with the issues concerning the development of the region.

He alleged that there are elements in the government that are pushing the criminal distraction as an issue to blight the real issue or agitation of the people of the Niger Delta.

He said the fact that there are criminals in the customs or immigration services, does not mean those institutions are bad and should discontinue with their core objectives.

"They have also linked every crime such as kidnappings even when the police caught the culprits as members of the same household as the victims; the government still maintained a campaign of calumny.

"It is for this we quickly realized it was a deliberate smear campaign to give the struggle a bad reputation to kill it and they almost succeeded," he said.

Gbomo insisted that "likewise, we will not allow crimes perpetrated by men of the armed forces and criminal gangs to be used against us."

He said the Niger Delta Ministry would not solve the problems of the region, arguing that no ministry in the country had been able to solve any of the many problems confronting the Nigerian-State right from its creation.

"Is it the ministry of works with all the bad roads? Let's not deceive ourselves. That ministry card was played to buy time, allow those ambitious for political appointments fight themselves and distract as well as keep the people busy for a while debating on an issue," he said.