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Monday, January 19, 2009

Two oil workers feared dead as militants attack vessels

From Kelvin Ebiri, Port Harcourt

TWO oil workers were feared dead following a weekend attack on two vessels by suspected militants at Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) crude oil loading platform at Bonny, Rivers State.

However, the Joint Task Force (JTF) has described as untrue a claim by the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) that the attacks on Ajakaja, Uduungama, and Okukpor communities at the weekend were aimed at rescuing two British hostages, Robin Barry Hughes and Matthew John Maguire.

The Guardian learnt that suspected militants attacked two oil vessels said to belong to French oil multinational, Total, at Shell's crude oil loading platform late on Saturday night.

Sources said the gunmen, apparently in a bid to seize the vessel and take its crewmen hostage, shot sporadically on an oil tanker but their effort to board the vessel was thwarted.

Having failed, the gunmen quickly shifted their focus to a tugboat and two service boats. During the fierce gunfire that ensued, two of the crew members were feared killed. Though one of the vessels was found yesterday, it was without its eight crew members, now believed to have been taken hostage.

When contacted, JTF and Shell's spokespersons, Lt. Colonel Sagir Musa and Mr. Precious Okolobo, confirmed the incident but declined to comment on whether anyone was killed during the attack.

Okolobo said: "There has been an attack on two vessels by the SPDC's crude loading platform at Bonny. The incident occurred yesterday (Saturday) night. We are investigating to get more details."

Though no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, MEND had last week said its policy on kidnapping oil workers from Western Europe and North America remained unchanged and would continue to form an integral part of the group's pressure strategy in the emancipation struggle in 2009.

The attack on the oil vessels is coming on the heels of a JTF raid on three suspected militant camps in the Andoni axis of Rivers State on Friday and Saturday. One militant leader, George Adumu and three other persons are feared dead as a result of the military offensive at Ajakaja, Uduungama, and Okukpor.

MEND spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, said the attack on the Andoni communities was based on faulty intelligence by the JTF.

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He said: "The Nigerian military Joint Task Force comprising the Navy, Air Force and Army raided the communities of Ajakaja, Uduungama, and Okukpor in Rivers State on Friday, January 16 to Saturday, January 17, 2009 in search of the two British hostages."

Gbomo said the security agencies began firing from the air, land and sea at innocent civilians who had no idea why they were being attacked.

He said: "We doubt this is the type of training the British government is giving to the Nigerian military as such an obtuse approach puts the British hostages at risk. As a precaution, we have moved the hostages deeper into the creeks in two different states."

But the JTF spokesperson, Lt. Col. Musa, in a swift reaction described MEND's claim as false, malicious and a dubious propaganda.

"We would not attempt to attack a camp where hostages are physically present. There are other better ways to handle such obnoxious situations. The MEND message, crooked as it is, should therefore be disregarded," he said.

Musa said: "Unidentified militants attacked Bonny crude loading point. A tugboat, Primer Njasi and MT Front were intercepted and the crew men- all Nigerians- were diverted with the vessel to unknown destination. The event occurred outside our area of responsibility. The boat has since been recovered by the navy component of the JTF."

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