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Thursday, February 26, 2009

Gunmen attack helicopter, injure passenger

From Willie Etim (Yenagoa) and Wole Shadare (Lagos)

UNIDENTIFIED gunmen attacked a helicopter carrying passengers to an oil facility in Bayelsa State yesterday. One of the passengers aboard the craft, whose number was not disclosed, suffered serious injuries and was taken to an undisclosed hospital. The attack occurred near the Tebidaba flow station belonging to the Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) in Southern Ijaw Local Council of Bayelsa State.

Subsequently, all flights to and from the station have been suspended.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack which came barely 24 hours after Governor Timipre Sylva called for increased naval presence in the area.

A statement later yesterday from Head of Commercial of Aero Contractors, Mark Snoxell, stated that an Aero Contractors Sikorsky 76 helicopter operating a contract service, was yesterday damaged by gun fire whilst on a routine flight in the Tebidaba area in the Niger Delta and that as a result, "one passenger was wounded".

He explained that the aircraft safely returned to its base in Port Harcourt, while the injured was receiving treatment in the hospital.

He however stated that the helicopter was undergoing appropriate checks from Aero's maintenance team.

Confirming the attack to The Guardian in Yenagoa, Commander of the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) in the state, Lt.-Col. Nkana Efik, said the helicopter was travelling from Ogboinbiri to Tebidaba oil facility, when it was hit by a single shot.

"We are trying to trace where the shot came from. We are now talking to the pilot," he said, adding, "I think there was some kind of crisis there. We don't know exactly..."

The extent of damage to the helicopter could not be ascertained as at press time, but checks available has it that the gunmen actually intended to destroy the helicopter before it escaped.

A top management employee told The Guardian that the owners of the helicopter, a frontline local airline, have decided to suspend their operations.

According to him: "No flight is leaving here (Port Harcourt) for now. All the flights are presently on standby. Our staff that were supposed to travel to Brass and parts of Delta State like Kwale were asked to return home pending when we have finished reviewing the situation."

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Due to this development, The Guardian learnt the company is now considering transporting workers from Port Harcourt to its operational bases like, Omoku, Obrikom and Kwale by road under heavy security.

When contacted on phone, Agip's Deputy Managing Director/ General Manager, Human Resources, Dr. Daru Owei, said he was still being briefed on the situation.

Fifteen days ago, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) threatened to attack Agip following the Italian government's decision, through its Foreign Minister Franco Frattini, to offer two attack boats to the Nigerian military. MEND said the boats would be used by the government to wage an unjust war against the people of the Niger Delta region.

Speaking when the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ishayi Ibrahim and other top naval officers paid him a courtesy visit at Government House, Yenagoa, on Tuesday, Sylva stated that the state had the longest coastline in the country, stretching from Agge in Ekeremor Local Council of the state to Rivers State, in addition to producing a quarter of the nation's crude oil.

He lamented that despite all the natural resources the state was giving the country, it was not enjoying the full presence of the Navy, saying Bayelsa was strategically located and as such a larger naval presence should be there to provide security in the creeks.

The governor noted that the \$70 billion Brass Liquefied Natural (LNG) in the state was recently attacked by gunmen, adding that it took the combined efforts of some security personnel to repel the onslaught.

This, he noted, showed that the people and the military were performing their duties effectively, and called for increased remuneration and immediate promotion of naval ratings serving in the area.

On the construction of a jetty for the navy, the governor promised to assist and implored the navy to do all it could to maintain the existing cordial relationship between his government and the navy.

In a related development, one person has been killed in fresh crisis between youths of Amassoma, Southern Ijaw Local Council and mobile policemen in the community.

It is reported that some youths had a quarrel with one of the community leaders, so that the youths regrouped and burnt down his residents and the headquarters of the development centre.

Spokesman of the state Police Command, DSP Iniobong Ibokette, confirmed the riot, but said one of the suspects was arrested, while another was shot by one of the policemen who moved in to contain the rioters.

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