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Saturday, February 28, 2009

JTF Kills Bayelsa Helicopter Attackers

- Peace Committee Settles Rift Over Task Force Attack
From Madu Onuorah, Abuja and Willie Etim, Yenagoa

NO fewer than six suspected militants who allegedly shot at a helicopter on Wednesday near the Tebidaba Flow Station in Southern Ijaw Local Council of Bayelsa State were reportedly killed on Thursday by operatives of the Joint Military Taskforce (JTF) during an invasion of a militant camp in Daroama enclave of the state.

A section of the militant camp was destroyed in the heavy gun battle between the soldiers and the militants.

Coordinator, Joint Media Campaign Center (JMCC) of the JTF, Col. Rabe Abubakar who confirmed the militants' death, said other hoodlums who sustained injuries in the shootout escaped.

Also, Abubakar disclosed that JTF troops deployed at Warri Refinery and Petrochemicals Company (WRPC), Ekpan, Delta State yesterday foiled a robbery attempt on one Mr. Paul Aje, a petroleum products marketer.

Abubakar said: "The robbers had successfully made away with the sum of N3.4 million when they were intercepted by our troops. One of them was killed while part of the money, which amounted to N1.4million, was retrieved."

Meanwhile, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee in Bayelsa State has resolved the face-off between families of three people, including a pregnant woman, shot dead in August last year by JTF troops in Lobia market area, Southern Ijaw Local Council.

The soldiers had in a case of mistaken identity shot at a passenger boat, killing a student of the Niger Delta University, Amassoma, Peter Sese, his pregnant girlfriend, Titi Ajayi and one Eniamie Sese from Foropa community, who were on their way to Lobia. Another passenger, Mr. Clever Ebibai was injured in the incident.

Authorities of the JTF's Operation Restore Hope told The Guardian that the troops swooped on the militants' camp, controlled by one Woki Godswill Ibrabayu, also known as "Kitikata," who is suspected to be responsible for the killing of three soldiers at Nembe, Bayelsa State last year.

Abubakar said: "The JTF carried out a cordon-and-search operations in Ewoama area, close to a militants' camp in the

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early hours of 26 February, 2009. This operation was met with unwarranted shooting at the JTF troops who were there only to look for illegal arms and ammunition and apprehend criminals.

"According to the JTF's internal security mandate, which permits self-defense, the force defended itself. A very significant part of Ewoama Militant Camp was destroyed in the operation. Severe casualties were suffered by the militants and some quantities of arms, ammunition and charms were recovered."

However, Abubakar could not give his words as to the whereabouts of Ibralayu, who allegedly terrorizes the creeks and waterways of the area.

He stated that the camp belonged to the hoodlums behind attacks on oil facilities, soldiers and civilians in recent times including Wednesday's attack on an Agip helicopter on routine shuttle service between Ogboibiri and Tebidaba flow stations.

Abubakar added: "What the JTF is doing today is to get rid of criminals in Bayelsa who have been terrorising, robbing, killing innocent people in the state."

It will be recalled that such military assaults on camps had in the past elicited retaliatory attacks on heavily guarded military installations and oil facilities by militant groups who claimed to be fighting for a better deal for the oil-rich Niger Delta in crude revenue sharing.

One of the militant groups, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), said last month that it was calling off a five-month-old ceasefire in the region but has not carried out any significant attacks since then.

A statement by the Media Officer of the peace committee, Alphine Ogoh, said the resolution followed a series of meetings brokered by the panel.

The committee reportedly met with families of the deceased led by Timiepere Ajayi, Chief Africanus Sese, Konzitei Sese and their negotiators Mr. Ayibakenimi Markson Sese, Dr. Jackson Ododo, Nyemo Tubolayefa and the injured Ebibai.

The statement read in part: "At the last meeting held last Friday and chaired by the chairman of the Peace and Conflict Resolution Committee, Chief James Jephthah, the families of the victims, through their negotiator Dr. Jackson S. Ododo, agreed that the issue be settled out of court and without violence as it has been established that the soldiers acted without due knowledge of the identity of the victims."

Jephthah stated that after several separate meetings between the victims' families, his committee, representatives of the JTF and the oil and gas servicing company operating in the area, they accepted that peace should reign and the deceased be given a befitting burial.

He said the JTF was only protecting the oil and gas servicing company in a security arrangement provided by the Federal Government.

He said while the Federal Government might not pay compensations to the victims' families, the peace committee and the state government were interested in resolving the issue and ensuring lasting peace in the area.

Jephthah disclosed that the oil company had agreed to defray the cost of the lost boat, engines and the hospital bill of the injured to avoid litigation.

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