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## Gunmen abduct Briton, blow up facility

- Oil output drops by 300,000 barrels

*From Madu Onuorah (Abuja), Kelvin Ebiri (Port Harcourt) and Yetunde Ebosele (Lagos)*

**M**ILITANTS in the Niger Delta struck yesterday in different parts of the region.

On Sunday, the armed men had abducted a Briton and killed his guard. Yesterday, they hit a houseboat used by an oil firm operating in the region and destroyed it.

These attacks, including many before yesterday's, have cost the nation dearly. A Central Bank of Nigeria report yesterday said that the nation's oil output had dropped by 300,00 barrels.

Security operatives told The Guardian that the bandits executed the abduction of the Briton at a hotel along the East-West Road in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital, where he was having a drink.

On arrival, the kidnappers, who took great care not to arouse any suspicion, ordered drinks but minutes later, swooped on their target, shooting and killing the policeman attached to their victim, who was also drinking at the hotel.

The gunmen, sources said, swiftly dragged the expatriate into one of their cars and took him to an unknown destination.

Rivers State Police Command Spokesperson, Mrs. Rita Inoma-Abbey, who confirmed the incident, said the police were investigating it.

Also, the Joint Task Force (JTF) yesterday accused "some unrepentant and unpatriotic militants" of carrying out an early morning attack in which a boathouse belonging to DAEWOO Nig Ltd was destroyed in Igbomatoru, Delta State. The company was contracted to lay pipelines for the Italian oil firm, Agip Nigeria Ltd.

The JTF, which identified the leader of the militants that destroyed the boathouse as Ogunbos, vowed to "pursue and arrest those responsible for this attack."

And a report on the state of the Nigerian economy released by the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) has shown that the fortunes of the oil industry dipped in January this year.

In the report, made available to The Guardian yesterday, CBN said in January, the country's daily production of crude oil, including condensates and natural gas liquids, dropped by 300,000 bpd from December's output of 2.2 million bpd to 1.9 mbd.

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It said crude oil exports by Nigeria (which before the Niger Delta crisis, was rated as Africa's top producer) stood at 1.45 million bpd for the month under review. Although the country is still the world's eighth-largest oil exporter with a production capacity of 3.2 million bpd, the global meltdown and violence in the Niger Delta have drastically reduced its output to far below its potential.

The CBN said due to lower output coupled with the fall in global oil prices, Nigeria's oil income dropped by 19.2 per cent to \$1.85 billion in January from \$2.29 billion the preceding month.

Also yesterday, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said it had nothing to do with the general amnesty offered by the Federal Government to all militants, who renounce violence and turn in their weapons to the authorities.

Its spokesman, Jomo Gbomo, in an online interview with The Guardian, said MEND would only surrender its arms on the orders of its incarcerated leader, Henry Okah, whom, he asked the government to immediately release unconditionally as part of the group's terms for peace in the Niger Delta.

But former Justice of the Supreme Court, Adolphus Karibi-Whyte, has argued that the capital punishment prescribed by some states would not check the menace of kidnapping. He said the measure might even harden up kidnappers, leading to more fatal abductions

His words: "When you say a person will be killed if caught for kidnapping, the person will say 'okay, I better kill since when they catch me I will be killed.' There is a need for caution. You can arrest somebody in error, try, convict and execute him. When you later discover that he is innocent, you have already killed him and you cannot correct that. That is the snag in capital punishment. You cannot reverse it when you find that you are wrong.

"That is why most people prefer life imprisonment or 20 years in prison. If the person is innocent and he is still alive you could exonerate him. The better option is not capital punishment. Capital punishment is not a solution for kidnapping."

Gbomo also said a holistic peace process, which must address core issues such as fiscal federalism, was imperative for the group's consideration of the government's amnesty offer.

He described President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's amnesty gesture as "a hoax," arguing that "you do not grant amnesty to someone who has not been convicted in the first place."

However, Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan of Delta State has commended the President over the amnesty he offered to the militants.

Uduaghan, who spoke at a reception for the Chief of Defence Staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike in Asaba, last weekend, said the decision was a step in the right direction, stressing that it would help to solve the crisis in the area.

Gbomo accused Yar'Adua of ignoring the Niger Delta technical committee's recommendations on the crisis, describing it "as a mark of insincerity."

He said: "How does the government expect the followers of a man to drop their weapons for the so-called amnesty when the leader has not been granted one. In the first place, we do not believe we are doing anything illegal to receive an amnesty."

Gbomo said the detained MEND leader was deceived into believing that he was part of a peace process when Vice President Goodluck Jonathan visited him in South Africa.

MEND said it would not involve itself in any talks with the government because these would fail over time. According to Gbomo, "we will only be involved in talks in which the international community takes part. Bakassi return would have been botched if the agreement was not solid. As you may recall, our senators tried to renege on the agreement."

Gbomo said some militants had been lured by such peace parleys and then arrested or killed, citing some recent incidents in Rivers State. He alleged that many youths have been executed at police stations and the Joint Task Force (JTF) base as suspected militants.

MEND said the current militarisation of the Niger Delta and the deployment of gunboats to the region might eventually lead to a civil war.

It cautioned that any attack on any of its bases would "lead to the complete halt of Nigerian oil and gas exports and the supply of gas for domestic power consumption."

Oil accounts for 80 per cent of Nigeria's revenue. The decline in oil earnings led to Nigeria's external reserves dropping by six per cent from the previous level of \$53 billion to \$50.05 billion in January, the apex bank said.

Finance Minister Mansur Mukhtar had said two weeks ago that the nation's oil output had averaged 1.6 million bpd so far this year, while the government's production benchmark was 2.292 million bpd.

The government had benchmarked its oil at \$45 a barrel for the 2009 budget and the new price of the crude, which fell below \$36 per barrel yesterday, is \$9 below the budget target.

Due to the upsurge in militancy in the Niger Delta, the major oil-producing firms recently suspended further deployment of expatriate workers.

An official of Shell was last week quoted as confirming that the company had commenced the evacuation of its employees from the Niger Delta after a militant group warned it to quit the region or risk more attacks.

Shell has, however, declared that it has no plans to leave Nigeria but was not prepared to gamble with the safety and well-being of its workers and contractors.

A militant group led by Ateke Tom had accused Shell and other oil firms including Agip, the local subsidiary of Italian oil company, ENI, and the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) of helping the Nigerian military to carry out attacks on its camps in Rivers State.

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