

Govt defends military operation in Delta, says Nigeria is safe

- Military captures more boats
- Nwabueze calls for sovereign national conference
- South-South caucus calls for caution

From Madu Onuorah, John-Abba Ogbodo Lemmy Ughegbe, Terhemba Daka (Abuja), Kelvin Ebiri, RoseAnn Chikereuba (Port Harcourt), Alemma-Ozioruva Aliu (Benin), Kamal Tayo Oropo and Alex Olise (Lagos)

THE Federal Government yesterday broke its apparent silence on the ongoing military campaign in the Niger Delta.

President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, who reacted to claims that foreign leaders were shunning Nigeria because of insecurity in the country, which the military expedition in Delta State had portrayed, said he was not aware of it. He said that the country was safe for all Nigerians, foreigners and world leaders to visit and do business.

The Attorney-General and Minister of Justice, Chief Michael Aondoakaa, who also spoke on the attack in Abuja yesterday, declared that "no responsible government will sit quiet and watch an unwarranted attack launched on its armed forces without any provocation."

Yar'Adua spoke when he received his Togolese counterpart, Faure Gnassingbe, in Abuja, insisted that he was not aware that foreign leaders were scared of coming to Nigeria because of the crisis in the Niger Delta.

For Gnassingbe, the use of criminality to solve problems in Africa was dangerous. He, therefore, asked militants to opt for dialogue to end the Niger Delta imbroglio.

Answering a reporter's question on foreign leaders' alleged shunning of Nigeria, Yar'Adua said: "I am not aware that many leaders are scared of coming to Nigeria. I am not aware of any world leader who has called me to say he is scared to come to Nigeria. The situation in the Niger Delta region has been there remotely for decades and the escalation of violence and criminality that have taken root have been there for between eight to nine years. There is no different situation that has happened today to warrant the statement you have made. I think that statement is just your own judgment of the situation. But I am not aware of any leader anywhere in the world who has that position. I don't know how to answer your question."

The President stated that the major areas of co-operation between Nigeria and Togo include trade, energy and defence, citing the case of Togolese soldiers who are in Nigeria for training.

President Yar'Adua also gave insight into the areas of his talks with Gnassingbe. "As you know, we have several frameworks. We have ECOWAS but we also have what we call Zone of Alliance Co-Prosperity (ZACO). In that framework, we have Ghana, Benin, Togo and Nigeria. And we specifically targeted the energy sector. But we do not exclude other sectors. The President was rightly saying that we do need to revive some of the agreements that have come to expiration."

At a lecture to mark the 30th anniversary of Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies (NIALS) in Abuja, Aondoakaa said the position of the government is to resolve the problem in the Niger Delta amicably.

He, however, said "no country will expose its armed forces to unwarranted attack. In the fresh onslaught in the region, militants have killed an Army Major, a Lieutenant Colonel, and five rank and files. No responsible country will sit quiet and watch an unwarranted attack on its armed forces; without any provocation," he said.

Constitutional lawyer and Chairman of The Patriots, Prof. Ben Nwabueze, who spoke on "Judicialism and Good Governance in Africa," accused former President Olusegun Obasanjo and the Supreme Court of contributing to the escalation of the unrest in the Niger Delta.

Nwabueze said the 2002 judgment of the Supreme Court in the case brought by the then Obasanjo government against Littoral States on allocation of revenues from "off-shore" petroleum resources, where the apex court ruled in favour of the government that "the seaward boundaries of the littoral states are for purposes of calculating the revenue derived from the natural resources of these states as well as the low watermark of the land surface," worsened the situation.

"The Supreme Court is part of the trouble we have today in the Niger Delta, it was not Obasanjo alone. The littoral states went to court but Obasanjo manipulated the Supreme Court to say that littoral or waterways is not part of states.

"That was the origin of the problem in Niger Delta. The people of the Niger Delta are facing lot of problems. The harm has been done with this entire concession thing," he said.

As a panacea to the unrest in the region and the country at large, he advocated a sovereign national conference, saying that the amendment of the 1999 Constitution by the National Assembly cannot resolve the yearnings of the people.

The Joint Task Force (JTF) code-named Operation Restore Hope, yesterday intensified its attacks on perceived militants' camps in Delta State.

Giving a situation report of the operations described as successful, the military authorities said two boats allegedly owned by the militants were captured while some illegal refineries in some communities in Ughelli were also destroyed.

As condemnation trails the military onslaught, the JTF yesterday urged Nigerians and the international community to exercise patience and show understanding on the matter. The latest offensive was fierce in Ijaw communities in Warri South-West Local Council of Delta State.

It said the operations "are for the ultimate interest of our great nation."

Although unofficial, the death toll from the first three days of the attack has been placed at 65, majority of whom are civilians.

Against this backdrop, members of the South-South Parliamentary Caucus of the House of Representatives have cautioned against the killing of civilians in the raids.

The Task Force also said its troops, deployed in Abiteye Chevron Flow Station, Delta State had captured two Passport Speed Boats belonging to a militant leader Kingsley Opuye.

In a statement yesterday, JTF spokesman, Col. Rabe Abubakar, said "the militants on board the speed boats fled and abandoned them after a fierce exchange of fire with military personnel. The boats have been towed to our location, even though no arrest was made."

Abubakar added that "the security outfit is monitoring the situation closely. And we are urging all well-meaning Nigerians and foreigners to exercise patience and understanding with JTF continuous operations, which is for the ultimate interest of our great nation."

He also announced that the JTF "has located and destroyed illegal local refineries at Oginibo community in Ughelli South Local Council in Delta State. The resuscitation of this illegal business is as a result of the ongoing dislodgement of militants from the creeks of the Niger Delta.

"The security outfit destroyed the illegal refineries following a tip-off from well-meaning people of Niger Delta that the illegal refiners were regrouping and moving equipment to the community to commence their illegal business earlier destroyed by troops."

Abubakar said "the illegal refiners thought that the JTF has shifted focus from their illicit trade due to the ongoing search and rescue operation against militancy in the region. The Task Force is poised to sustain its war on not only illegal local refineries but also on all forms of criminalities associated with crude oil theft. The JTF is hereby warning all those who want to use this opportunity to perpetrate criminalities in the region to desist from such acts as the security outfit is fully equipped to deal with all manners of criminalities simultaneously."

Apparently to avoid any surprise attack by the militants on oil facilities, the Nigerian Navy yesterday stepped up surveillance around the Bonga oil field located in the Gulf of Guinea, described as the heart of the Nigerian oil industry.

Military sources said the security beef was prompted by the ongoing skirmishes in Delta State.

The Guardian learnt that the Navy, working on intelligence report placed signs around the Bonga oil field, indicating that "it is no go area for anybody" except authorized persons.

The House of Representatives yesterday blamed multinational companies for the lingering crisis in the Niger Delta region.

The House reaction was sequel to a report from a five-member delegation from 'Hope for Niger Delta Campaign' yesterday to the effect that the multinational corporations had done nothing for their host communities in the last 50 years.

Chairman, Ad-hoc Committee on Niger Delta, Abdul Ningi, who conveyed the position of the lawmakers during the interaction, rhetorically asked: "Who gives ammunition to these militants, who gives oil to them? Have they built roads and schools? They are part of the cartel aggravating these crises. Nigeria is not the only country where oil is produced. We have Saudi Arabia and other countries, but why is the Nigerian situation so different?

"It is for people like you to find out what these multinational companies claimed to have spent in the region in terms of investment. Who buys oil from the high seas? Who knows how to sell oil to the militants and buy ammunition for them, is it not the multinationals?"

The chairman of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, Ledum Mitee, has said the carnage precipitated by the ongoing clash between the JTF and militants would have been avoided if the Federal Government had commenced the implementation of the committee's report on disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has challenged the Joint Task Force that if it claims that villages with civilian inhabitants were not used as target practice by the

Air Force jets, to allow local and international journalists access to the villages to ascertain the veracity of their claim.

Mitee told The Guardian yesterday in Port Harcourt, Rivers State that the existence of tragic situation in the Niger Delta has over the years created an avenue that helps to lower people's threshold for human rights. He said one should naturally have expected the military to separate the innocent from whoever they were fighting in the affected communities.

Former President of the Ijaw National Congress (INC), Prof. Kimse Okoko, has condemned what he described as a premeditated invasion of Ijaw communities in Delta State.

He said the military offensive merely makes nonsense of the Yar'Adua's offer of amnesty to Niger Delta militants.

Okoko said: "We find it difficult to accept the claim by the JTF that the attack was a search and rescue operation because Camp 5 is neither in Oporoza nor the other communities that they have decimated. We therefore hold the Federal Government and JTF responsible for wanton massacre of our people."

He urged the government to immediately halt further invasion of Niger Delta communities under whatever guise.

MEND spokesperson, Jomo Gbomo, accused the Army of spreading falsehood by alleging that no civilians were killed and communities destroyed in the current attack.

Gbomo said the Director of Defence Information, Col. Chris Jemitola and JTF spokesman, Lt.-Col. Rabe Abubakar were contradicting each other on the events leading to the indiscriminate bombardment, wanton destruction of property and killing of defenceless women, children and the elderly.

The South-South Parliamentary Caucus in the House of Representatives, which called for caution to avoid military incursion into "civilian settlements," said it would not support the killing of innocent people of the region.

The chairman of the caucus, Andrew Uchendu, said the group had always condemned the criminal dimension introduced into the genuine struggle for better treatment for the region. He said while the criminal elements were condemnable, the JTF should protect the peace-loving people of the Niger Delta.

The lawmaker appealed to the people not to use the present circumstance to cause any confusion that might be misconstrued by other Nigerians and the international community.

Also yesterday, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) condemned the military action, saying it had led to the loss of 500 law-abiding persons mostly women and children and another 200,000 rendered homeless.

In a press statement issued in Benin, Edo State, IYC President, Chris Ekiyor, said seven communities had been sacked by the military personnel, who have also occupied another 11.

He named the communities sacked by the military as Azama, Kunukunuam, Kurutie, Okerenkoro, Oporoza, Benikurukuru, Okoaranko, Kolodia-Gbe and Gbaramatu. "

He alleged that there have also been heavy military presence in Kaiama, Odi, Opokuma, Yenagoa, Bomadi, Patani, Okrika, Degema, Bonny, Buguma, and Belee, all Ijaw towns in Bayelsa and Rivers states.

The Afenifere Renewal Group (ARG) has also expressed dismay over military action in the Niger Delta, saying it was a dangerous turn of event.

In a statement made available to The Guardian, the group's National Publicity Secretary. Mr. Yinka Odumakin, said: "The ARG is saddened by the dangerous turn of events in the Niger Delta, which has seen a full-blown war situation arising from serial bombardments of towns and villages in the Niger Delta by the JTF.

"The warfare has led to untimely deaths and an unspecified number of casualties, including innocent civilians getting caught in the fire prowess of the Nigerian Armed Forces. "

Similarly, the Lagos chapter of the Ijaw National Congress (INC), has urged the Federal Government to cease further hostilities in the zone, particularly Gbaramatu.

In a statement signed by its chairman, Denzil Amagbe Kentebe, the group said the military action came as a surprise. "We woke up to this horrifying news of a seemingly genocidal nature unfolding in a targeted area of Ijaw land. It is reported that the Joint Task Force (JTF) is carrying out an illegal operation of ethnic cleansing in Gbaramatu Kingdom of Ijawland in Delta State."

INC said it was either Yar'Adua was not aware of this operation before it started or Nigerians were getting a message of insincerity from the Federal Government when it claims to have a peaceful solution to the Niger Delta crisis.