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Bomb blasts abort amnesty dialogue

TUESDAY, 16 MARCH 2010 16:47 MADU ONUORAH (ABUJA), KELVIN EBIRI (PORT HARCOURT), CHIDO OKAFOR (WARRI) AND ROSELINE OKERE (LAGOS) NEWS - NATIONAL

Two feared killed

Mend claims responsibility



WHAT promised to be a well-organised forum for Post-Amnesty Dialogue was yesterday cut short just 30 minutes after take-off by a powerful explosion. The blast sent the august assembly running for dear life. Two persons were feared killed. The explosion, which occurred right in front of the gate of the Government House Annex in Warri, Delta State, sent car parts flying into a section of the venue. The dialogue ceased abruptly.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has meanwhile claimed responsibility for the blast. The blast shook the large civic hall where the dialogue was taking place shattering some of the window panes and causing bellows of thick black smoke into air.

The Publisher of Vanguard newspaper, Mr. Sam Amuka, organiser of the forum, was delivering his speech when the incident occurred. Everywhere suddenly went silent, fear crept onto the faces of the assembly, which included governors, as they looked about with round eyes. Then followed murmuring, panic.

The high table was thrown into chaos as the dignitaries, including the governors, began hurrying out of the hall. The governors were led through the back doors to their vehicles.

Soldiers and other security details were ran in different directions as they tried to protect the dignitaries who began leaving the venue in confusion.

Some of the security vehicles in their frenzy to evacuate the governors and other dignitaries to safety rammed into each other.

Outside the gate, there was rumour of a third bomb about to go off. This sent everyone running out of the venue to a safe location on the expressway.

Two persons were feared dead in the explosions while many others sustained injuries, especially the security details at the gate who were allegedly hit by shrapnel from the blast. One of the victims is said to be a woman who was burnt beyond recognition in a car near the scene. Another was said to be an Okada rider who was driving past the scene at the time of explosion.

Earlier, a smaller explosion had gone off as the convoy of governors Emmanuel Uduaghan, Adams Oshiomhole and Ikedi Ohaikim of Delta, Edo and Imo states respectively, were driving into the venue.

Before the explosion, the chairman of the occasion, Gen. Andrew Azazi, had opened the event with a brief speech where he talked about a collective approach to addressing the Niger Delta problem.

Shortly after the explosion, the government of Delta State issued a statement signed by the Commissioner for Information, Mr. Oma Djebah.

The statement reads thus: "Warri: This morning (Monday, March 15, 2010), explosives mounted in two cars stationed at about 200 metres away from the venue of the conference organised by Vanguard, entitled 'Post-Amnesty Dialogue - Restoring Hope in the Niger Delta,' were detonated.

"To protect lives and property, the Governor of Delta State, His Excellency, Dr. Emmanuel Eweta Uduaghan, ordered immediate evacuation of participants to a safe location. The event has been put off by the organisers.

"The peoples of the Niger Delta will not be intimidated nor deterred by the cowardly act of a few opposed to a peaceful and non-violent approach of resolving the historic grievances of the region.

"We assure all that we will not be deterred in our determination to fast-track the development of our people."

MEND had, at precisely 10. 37 a.m. yesterday, issued a statement through e-mail that it was going to make an important announcement 33 minutes later.

And at 11.17 a.m., another statement tagged: "Bomb Alert in Warri" was released by the group through its mouthpiece, Jomo Gbomo, warning that it had successfully breached the security of the Delta State Government House in Warri and planted three explosive devices in and around the compound which would be detonated remotely.

MEND's grouse, it said, stems from the fact that the Delta State governor, Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan, had allegedly described the group as a mere media creation. And to prove the contrary, the militants opted to security in the state.

"In the coming days, we will carry out a number of attacks against installations and oil companies across the Niger Delta and will spread out to companies such as Total which have been spared in the past. We hope the actions which will follow will persuade Uduaghan that we exist outside of cyberspace."

Gbomo remarked that in MEND's usual effort to prevent the loss of innocent lives, people were advised to immediately evacuate the Government House annex in Warri and its immediate surroundings up to the Delta State Broadcasting Corporation.

MEND warned people not to remain in their cars and attempt to drive their cars and maintain safe distance from all cars and the area.

The deceit of endless dialogue and conferences, Gbomo said, would no longer be tolerated. According to him, "the lands of the people of the Niger Delta was stolen by the oil companies and Northern Nigeria with the stroke of a pen."

MEND said the Delta State sponsored conference is one of such tools of deception. According to Gbomo, "the Niger Delta has been partitioned into oil blocks which have been distributed amongst mostly Northerners while indigenes of the Niger Delta can barely survive. One such example being Gen. T.Y. Danjuma."

MEND threatened it would attack any such gatherings designed to propagate what it described as mere falsehood, and warned the public to avoid such gatherings as they may not be fortunate to have a warning before detonation.

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