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Soldiers invade Rivers community over alleged death of colleague

From Ann Godwin, Port Harcourt

PALPABLE fear has engulfed the Rundele community in Emohua Local Council of Rivers State, following invasion by suspected soldiers over alleged killing of their colleague and missing guns.

The *Guardian* gathered that the soldiers allegedly burnt down some houses in the community, while residents fled to take refuge in neighbouring communities.

Sources said the trouble started over the weekend at an illegal artisanal refinery site between Rumuekpe and Ndele communities.

According to the source, some soldiers, who allegedly came with motorcycles and vans to the site, started harassing the youth and collecting money from them as their share of the business. "Those who refused to comply had their products impounded and loaded into the vehicle they came with," the source added.

Confirming the development, a group, Youths and Environmental Advocacy Centre (YEAC-Nigeria), through its community-based "One Million Youth Volunteers Network of Human Rights Defenders and Promoters in Niger Delta", said trouble started when one of the artisanal refiners, who is also a member of Onelga Security, Peace Advisory Committee (OSPAC), in the area, was ordered by the soldiers, to load the confiscated illegally-refined petroleum products

into their waiting vehicle but said he was tired of doing it alone and can't continue.

The OSPAC member was allegedly punished by the soldiers by asking him to lie-down and face the sun, while looking for someone else to continue loading the products for them.

News of the OSPAC member's punishment quickly went out through phone calls, and his colleagues mobilised and stormed the scene to rescue their member.

His colleagues shot their pump action guns sporadically, overpowered the soldiers, who ran away leaving behind two of their colleagues, while their guns were allegedly seized.

"We are yet to recover from the last incident of explosion in Rumuekpe community

that killed over 100 people and they reported just less than 20.

"It was the army that set that fire on the pit, where people were scooping crude oil, because they refused to settle them. This is the situation in our community today and we want the army to leave us alone and go to Ndele, where their men were beaten and, where they have their ports to look for their guns. Army men have big ports that they use to refine crude oil in Ndele," the source added.

Executive Director of YEAC-Nigeria, Fyneface Dumnamene Fyneface, in a statement, yesterday, expressed surprise over the soldiers' invasion of Rumuekpe community.

He called on youths in Rumuekpe, Ndele and other communities in Rivers State,

and the Niger Delta to stop pipeline vandalism, crude oil theft and artisanal refining that would bring them into confrontation with security operatives like the scenario in Rumuekpe community and the recent explosion on March 3, 2023.

The Advocacy Centre also called on the Nigerian Army to sheathe their swords, engage the leadership of Rumuekpe and Ndele communities to resolve the issue and recover the guns allegedly taken by the youths," he added.

Fyneface called on Federal Government and Rivers State government, as well as the police to immediately intervene in the incident in Rumuekpe and surrounding communities.



Burnt house