

# Soldiers Burn 100 Houses In Port Harcourt

• Militants Kidnap Two Oil Workers, Kill Soldiers • SSS Smashes Syndicate In Delta

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Soldiers have burnt down at least 100 houses around the premises of Italian oil company, Saipem, where at least one Italian worker was kidnapped and his bodyguard killed overnight.

Residents said the soldiers stormed the waterside settlement around the compound of Saipem, a unit of Italian oil giant, ENI, poured petrol over the houses and set them on fire.

At least two people, including one Italian oil worker, were kidnapped from a bar in the slum area on Thursday night. The gunmen, who took them hostage, also shot and killed an army sergeant, who was protecting them.

Families returned to the area around the Saipem compound on

Friday morning, searching the ruins of their houses to recover personal items, but were chased away by soldiers brandishing bottles and throwing stones.

The reprisal came after President Olusegun Obasanjo ordered the security services to use "force for force" against militants, who have staged eight separate abductions this month alone.

In total, at least 19 people have been kidnapped, but only three are still in captivity.

"The Rivers State government has been encouraging this by promptly paying large sums for their (hostages') release," said the militant Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, which has taken hostages but said it was opposed to kidnapping for ransom.

"Politicians are also using this as a platform to showcase their

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# Soldiers Burn 100 Houses

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leverage among 'militia groups' in the delta. It's now a booming trade", the group added.

One attempted hostage release went wrong last Sunday, when militants bringing a Nigerian employee of Royal Dutch Shell out of captivity ran into a military convoy, and a gun duel ensued. At least 10 militants were killed and MEND vowed on Thursday to avenge their deaths.

Oil companies fear that the killings, and the military's heavy-handed crackdown may signal a new escalation in the conflict in the vast wetlands region, which pumps all of Nigeria's oil.

Meanwhile, two more foreign oil workers were abducted Friday at their Aker Base, Rumuolumeni in Port Harcourt, Rivers State after a gun duel between suspected militants and soldiers, which lasted for about 30 minutes.

The surprise attack reportedly left two persons dead, including a soldier, who was apparently guarding the expatriates working for an Italian oil servicing firm, Saipem Nigeria Limited.

However, about six persons reportedly received serious injuries during the attack, although it was not immediately clear whether the injured persons were mostly soldiers.

Sources around Aker Base told our correspondent that the militants entered the base disguised in military uniform and immediately moved to abduct the expatriates but faced serious resistance from a soldier who was guarding the base.

The attackers, who reportedly came through a waterfront in the area, entered a drinking joint known as Carol Bar within the base, where the expatriates were drinking and chatting. The militants then dragged the expatriates out.

The action of the suspected militants reportedly angered the soldier, who protested immediately but was silenced by bullets aimed at his head while another who dared them was shot in the leg.

The attackers, sources said, disappeared immediately with the kidnapped expatriates before the arrival of a batch of soldiers from the 2 Amphibious Brigades, Port Harcourt.

The soldiers reportedly set the houses ablaze based on claims that the residents of the slum area around the Aker Base were harbouring the militants that unleashed the attack and abducted the expatriates.

When our correspondent visited the area Friday after-

noon, the rubbles of the burnt buildings which accommodated hundreds of people were covered in heavy black smoke.

One of the affected residents, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the belongings burnt by the rampaging soldiers run into several millions of naira.

Although, a security man at Saipem claimed the foreign oil workers were returning off-shore. Officials of the company, however, refused to speak on the incident.

But spokesman of the 2 Amphibious Brigade in Port Harcourt, Major Sagir Musa, confirmed the incident.

He explained that the soldiers were caught unawares as a result of the camouflage worn by the militants.

He said when the assailants first entered the base, the soldiers on duty mistook them for friends because of the way they were dressed, but made a late resistance when the militants started shooting and seized one of the white men out.

Major Sagir could, however, not give the identities of the abducted oil workers, but confirmed that one soldier was killed, while another one got injured.

He said one of the militants was killed, five of them got injured and rifles were recovered from them. This is the third time militants would invade the Aker Base within four months to abduct foreign oil workers.

Luck, however, ran out on a suspected member of a 10-man syndicate that kidnaps expatriates in the Niger Delta for ransom. He was arrested in Delta State. Security officials claimed that the syndicate is known as the Niger Delta Enlightenment and Expedition Force.

Delta State Director of the State Security Service, Adebayo Babalola, in a statement made available to reporters in Asaba on Friday, said the suspect, Nicholas Dickson, who hails from Akugbene in Bomadi local government area of Delta State, and members of his gang had abducted a Lebanese, whose name was given as Dany, on August 18 in Port Harcourt.

Danny was said to be a staff of Homan Engineering Company based in Port Harcourt.

According to Babalola, "Danny was abducted while making a call on his GSM handset in a parked white Hilux Toyota Pick-Up Van along a road in Ahoada, Rivers State, when members of the syndicate on patrol in a bus blocked the Hilux pick up van and at gunpoint forced him into the fleeing bus to waterside enroute Enekorogha town in Burutu LGA, where he has been kept in captivity since 18th August, 2006 in a particular hide-out."

The SSS director added, "The syndicate requested for the sum of N50m as ransom before the release of Danny."

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sources informed *Saturday Independent* that a powerful legal team led by Ben Nwabueze (SAN) would soon head for the court to challenge the lawmakers' arrest.

Moments before he was taken away, the Speaker, however, explained the circumstances of his hiding in the court premises, saying "I was just there (in hiding) on the instruction of my lawyers. My lawyers said I should wait for them. That was why I waited here."

Indications that the operatives were going to finally move against Lalong and his deputy started at 12.30 a.m. on Friday, when more operatives and heavily armed mobile policemen arrived the OAU Quarters to take strategic positions in and around the Federal High Court premises.

Shortly after, an official of the commission arrived with torches, following which power supply to the court was cut.

Some of the operatives were thereafter seen moving about the now pitch-dark court premises with torches in search of the lawmakers.

Electricity was, however, restored to the court premises minutes before the arrival of Lamurde, setting the stage for the final assault on the hideout of Lalong and Zumunta.

The Director of Operations, who took charge immediately he arrived the scene at 1.05 a.m., shouted orders to his men to move into the main office complex of the court, moments after which sounds of forced entry was heard.

At exactly 1.30 a.m., the Deputy Speaker, spotting a flowing beige coloured babariga, was ushered out from the main entrance leading into the office complex of the court.

He was closely followed by the Speaker.

Pressed, after 17 hours of hiding, both Lalong and Zumunta immediately headed for the toilet attached to the court security gate to urinate before they were taken away.

Meanwhile, following the arrest of Lalong and 12 of his

## Security Agents

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undisclosed location within the town.

The security agents had cordoned off Beverly Hills Five Star Hotels along Nnewi-Ozubulu road, the expected venue of the conference as of the time of this report.

The soldiers according to