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Civilian deaths won't deter us in Niger Delta – Army Chief

•Togo will soon be apprehended, GOC pledges

 By Rotimi Akinwumi (*Abuja*) and Bassey Inyang (*Calabar*)


Members of the Senate Aviation Committee, Gyang Datung (left), Anyim Ude (Chairman), Obiorah Udechukwu; and Director of Airport Security and Engineering Services, Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN), Saleh Dunomah (second right), and Alkali Seidu, during the inspection of the Enugu International Airport, Enugu.

Troops will continue their onslaught against insurgency in the Niger Delta, regardless of the outcry over the loss of civilian lives in the recent raids, the Chief of Army Staff, Lt. General Onyeabo Ihejirika, has declared.

Ihejirika spoke on Wednesday in Abuja.

Supporting the declaration down south in Obubra, Cross River State, the General Officer Commanding (GOC), 82 Division of the Army, Major General Sarkin Bello said militant leader John Togo will soon be apprehended by the Joint Task Force (JTF).

Apprehending Togo was the reason the JTF bombarded Ayakoromor village in

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Abuja



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Delta State last week, in which about 150 civilians were reportedly killed, a figure the JTF disputed.

Ihejirika said the Army, rather than being deterred, is ready to crush the militants until they are all flushed out.

He blamed them for any loss of civilian life during the confrontation, accusing them of using civilians as human shield, which is a war crime.

He admitted that there were some civilian deaths but refused to classify it as a massacre.

Iherijika spoke in Abuja when he toured the newly commissioned headquarters of the Military Pension Board (MPB), where he assured active and retired personnel of efficient administration of their pension funds.

His words: “The Army position is that there is no case of massacre by the Nigerian Armed Forces. In the case of the operation you have just cited, reports indicate that there were some collateral damage because the militants operated from that end.

“This has again put us back to the drawing board to ensure that collateral damage is reduced to the barest minimum or possibly eliminated altogether.

“The tactics of using civilians as human shield is an ugly one but let me assure you that in all our operations, we will put the safety of civilians uppermost.

“Let me reiterate, however, that the incident will not reduce the intensity of the operation as we are determined to rid the entire area of militants, so that security can return and development restored within the shortest possible time.”

Ihejirika commended the MPB, headed by Major General Bitrus Kwaji, and allayed the fears of pensioners on the impending pull out from the National Pension Commission (PenCom).

He said they should rather expect better service delivery from the MPB “because the environment has now been created for the challenges to be encountered when they eventually exit PenCom.

“The new office is adequately equipped and computerised, and with the use of biometrics, any fund released for the pensioners will not go to fraudsters.

“This will ensure a more efficient operation that will in turn impact positively on the administration of the pensions of military officers, both serving and retired.”

Bello promised the apprehension of Togo after the passing out ceremony of the 10th batch of former militants at the training camp in Obubra.

He advised Togo to surrender himself and his group without delay, as the JTF is determined to flush out all insurgents, but without civilian casualties.

Said Bello: "Let me use your medium to advise John Togo to surrender his arms. They say you can run but you cannot hide. There is a limit to which you can deceive yourself."

“Some of his boys actually surrendered, and John Togo himself surrendered to me, but for a reason best known to him, he decided to go back to violence. We have passed that stage that John Togo feels he can take us for granted. We shall soon catch up with him.”

Bello stressed that all efforts are being made to arrest militancy, and there is no hiding place for Togo.

“The military is doing everything possible to ensure civilian casualty is reduced in our efforts at uprooting militancy from Niger Delta. It’s a peculiar situation which the public should understand.”

He described the programme as a success.

“One funny thing is that since we are in a democracy, everyone is entitled to his opinion, but I tell you the truth, from my heart, is that the amnesty is a huge success.

“As someone who has been at the receiving end of this issue, I am most qualified to assess the effect of the programme. It is indeed a tremendous success beyond our imagination.”

Bello said violence exists not only in Nigeria but in other countries, and “I



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think in our own case we are trying to control and reduce violence generally.”

He urged Abuja to continue with the amnesty programme, saying it has brought peace to the Niger Delta.

There was disagreement between Ayakoromor villagers and the JTF on the number of casualties inflicted by troops in their attempt to catch Togo.

The raid came after some soldiers were killed by the rebels.

Troops who bombarded militants' hide-outs were alleged to have killed about 150 civilians and destroyed homes, a human rights lawyer, Preye Onduku, said on December 5 after he visited the scene.

However, the JTF denied that civilians died during the operation.

The Commander of the military operations said soldiers only opened fire when someone fired at them as they neared Ayakoromor's shoreline at the start of the raid on December 1.

But Onduku insisted that he saw the site of one grave containing six civilians allegedly killed by soldiers during his visit to Ayakoromor.

He said local people told him that soldiers made them bury other bodies in graves around the village and others are feared dead.

“They were angry that (the militants) had gone and killed their officers and they went to bomb the community. That is the simple reason,” he added

“I don't know whether it is anger or how to put it, but it is cowardice.”

Human rights activists also argued as many as 150 people died as troops used heavy machine gun fire and aerial bombing on the village.

Togo's lawyer said he is “on the high seas” far away from Ayakoromor.

JTF Spokesman Lt. Colonel Timothy Antigha had last month ruled out using aerial bombardment in its renewed offensive against the insurgents, vowing to smoke them out.

Antigha urged the people in riverside communities not to panic, saying the target was the elimination of the criminal gangs that destroy oil facilities and kidnap oil workers.

Said he: “The target of the ongoing operation is the elimination of criminal gangs, their arms cache, and other assets identified and confirmed as their centres of gravity.

“Traditional rulers and their subjects are advised to remain calm and continue to pursue their legitimate endeavours. Communities where these criminals are hiding are encouraged to call local JTF Commanders and turn them in immediately.”

However, it emerged on December 6 that the people of Ayakoromor are putting evidence together to do a legal battle with Abuja over the alleged killing of innocent people and destruction of property in the attempt by the JTF to arrest Togo.

Five lawyers from the community met to piece the evidence together to file a suit at the Federal High Court demanding N50 billion compensation.

Military sources said no fewer than 13 soldiers were killed when they ran into an ambush set up by Togo's fighters.

But a legal practitioner based in Warri, Preye Onduku, who is on the legal team, said: “So far, we have identified over 25 dead bodies and seven bullet-injured persons who are currently receiving medical treatment in various hospitals in Warri.”

JTF Commander, Major General, Charles Omoregie, accused the public of over reacting to the onslaught to dislodge Togo from the community.

He denied allegations that the JTF forced the indigenes to bury the dead people in mass graves.

He said the JTF has taken members of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) the Chairmen of Bomadi and Burutu councils as well as Red Cross officials, among others, to the community to see things for themselves.

Food items have been distributed to those displaced, according to him.

Nonetheless, some groups – among them the Labour Party (LP) and the Human Rights Writers' Association of Nigeria (HURIWA) – accused the military of excessive use of force in seeking to dislodge Togo.



Views:832

Article Comments

(2 comments)

On Thu Dec, 09 2010 06:25 by fon

If the security agencies are serious why haven't they posted the pictures of these militants that taken up arms again. By so doing the civilians may be able to cooperate. The federal government is concentrating on tv and other media war than the actual physical operation, there is no way that civilians around the area can escape death, the president did not help matter by his comment. It has to be swift in all fronts to be effective and reduce civilian causality which the armed forces do not seem to be capable.

On Thu Dec, 09 2010 05:28 by Uzoh Ekulide

I disagree with the Army Chief that Nigerian Military will continue to murder innocent women and children just because they are looking for roving militants. I expect the Army Chief to realise that this is a no win situation and that this a resistance against oppression. I do not want to accept that an Ijaw President and Igbo Army Chief will endanger their own kit and kins in Ijawland in the name of internal security. We must be pragmatic at this time, because we are laying example for others to follow. The position of Army Chief is a temporary political appointment which will end one way or the other but posterity will be judge of all. What does Ihejirika want to be remembered after he had left Office? As a man who murdered women and children, when in normal war there are rules of engagement in fighting in occupied areas. Please let us do the best to obtain the confidence of the recalcitrant militants and host communities, instead of this war that can at best be described as mass murder.

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