

CRACKDOWN ON MILITANTS

BY DANIEL ABIA

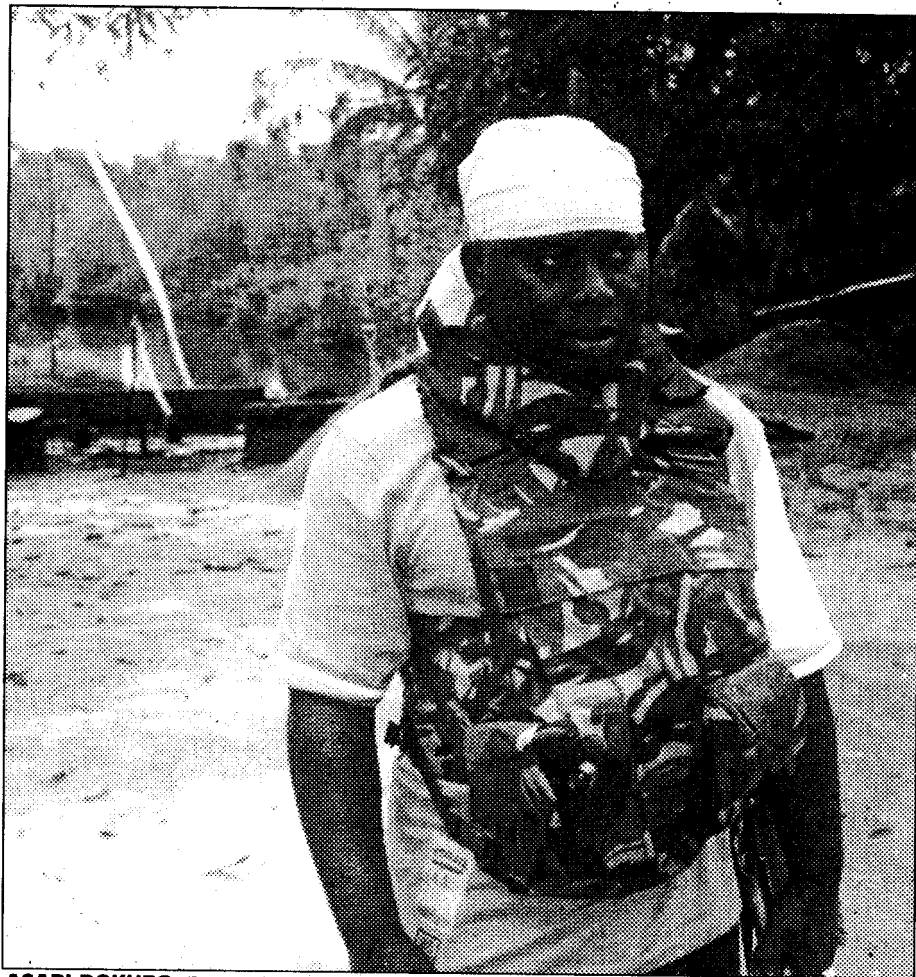
In a desperate move to restore confidence in the minds of investors doing businesses in the crisis-ridden Niger Delta, the federal government, last week, began a crackdown on the restive youths of the region. The offensive saw a large detachment of armed soldiers and policemen, swooping on alleged militants at the Diobu area of Port Harcourt on Friday, August 18. About 150 militants were reportedly arrested that day and driven to the police headquarters for necessary interrogations.

Shortly after his departure from Akwa Ibom State on August 13, President Olusegun Obasanjo had ordered a crackdown on identified militants whose activities are detrimental to the free flow of oil business in the area. For some days, military helicopters were seen hovering over the city with a view to aborting any suspected movements by the armed gangs. Few days later, a combined force of armed soldiers and policemen raided the Diobu axis which is considered as the stronghold of the militants in the state.

The incessant attacks on oil facilities and kidnapping hostages have caused a drastic drop in Nigeria's oil production by at least 25 percent. And foreign oil workers doing their respective trades in the Niger Delta region have severally threatened to shut down oil installations and leave the country. Already, foreign nationals are jittery over what becomes of their business interests if the militants should react to the federal government's latest offensive on them.

Hostage-taking became a veritable tool by militants on January 11, 2005 when the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, (MEND), captured 14 foreign oil workers at a boundary between Delta and Bayelsa states. Few weeks later, four more expatriates were kidnapped by an armed gang which led to the blowing up of Shell Petroleum Development Company's (SPDC), oil installations at Beneside in Ekeremor, Local government area of Bayelsa. In every such deadly exercise, there is

After several kidnappings of expatriates in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian Army has begun an offensive on militants by arresting them in droves



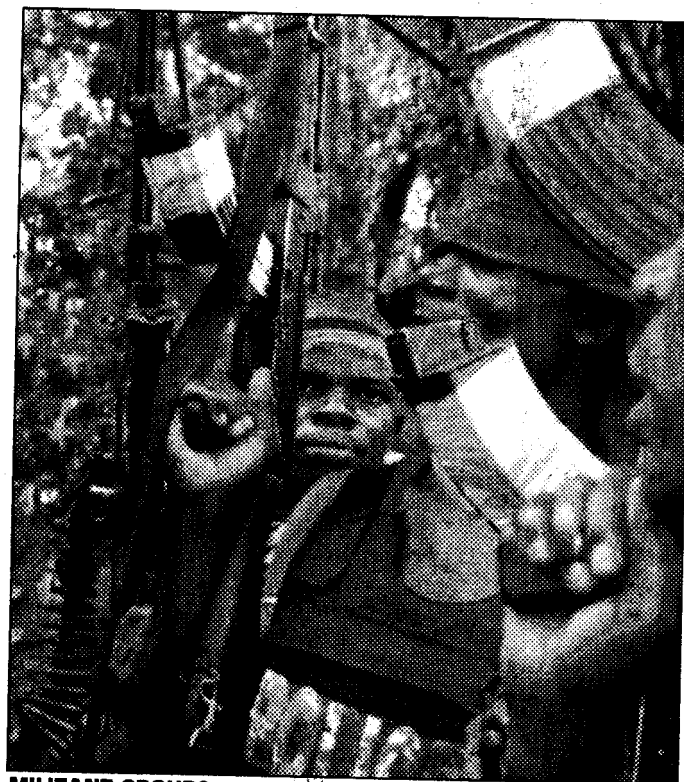
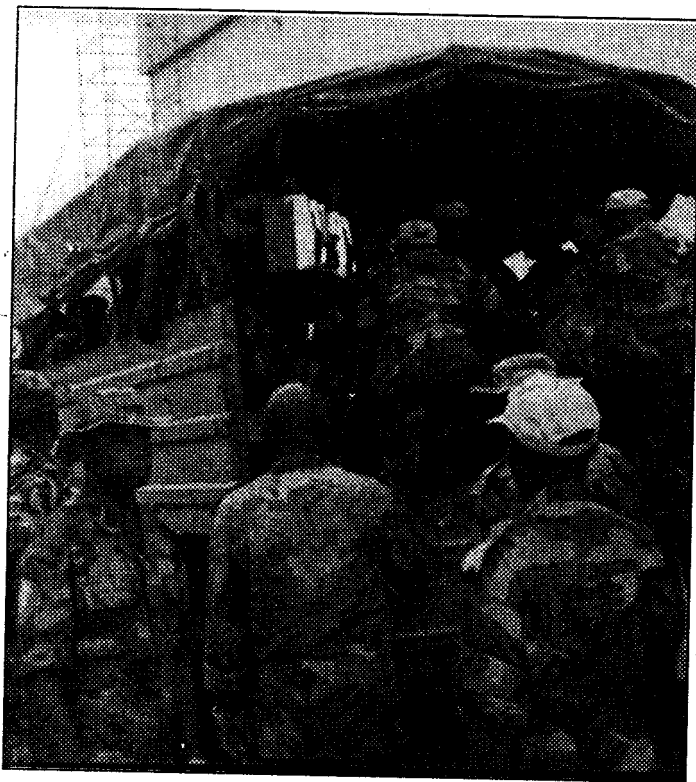
ASARI DOKUBO *Detained*

always a corresponding loss of lives and oil equipment. In one of the instances, no fewer than 14 Nigerian soldiers were killed by the militants and a house boat used as residence by the expatriates blown up.

These two major incidents gave vent to several others which later became a recurrent exercise much to the embarrassment of the federal government at the international level. But the coalition group of the militants has enumerated strong reasons why it will not stop taking hostages. In one of the releases issued by Cynthia Whyte, a spokesperson for MEND and Martyr's Brigade, the militants pressed hard for

the unconditional release of Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, NDPVF, and DSP Alamieyeseigha, the ousted Bayelsa State governor. They also demanded a financial compensation of billions to the Bayelsa State government for the undue exploitation of the state by oil conglomerates operating there, particularly the SPDC.

Between January 2005 and now, there have been about 15 hostage incidents in the Niger Delta. The flash points of the exercise have always been Rivers and Bayelsa states. And at least, 30 expatriates from no fewer than 12 countries of the world have been directly



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affected by the militants' actions.

Some of the countries affected are the United States of America, Britain, Honduras, Philippines, Korea, Morocco, Belgium, India, Spain, Canada, China and France among others. On Wednesday 7 June 2006 when five South Korean oil staff were kidnapped, Cynthia Whyte who is now the spokesperson of the Joint Revolution Council, JRC, said the foreigners were taken hostage in "response to the glaring insincerity of the Nigerian state and its judiciary to the illegal detention and trial of our esteemed and patriotic leader, Alhaji Mujihad Asari". Whyte boasted further that the JRC would "match insincerity with insincerity and the brute for brute". That single action saw the destruction of a gun boat of the naval forces, a house boat and one working rig.

Cynthia had stated that the militants would no longer care for the well-being of the hostages because "We have lost our patience, goodwill and hospitality". The five Koreans captured that time were H. J Kwon, A. Park, S. B Kim, O.K. Kim, and H. D Kim. The release of the Koreans was sequel to the plea of Asari Dokubo on June 8, 2006, that they should be set free. "The reason why I plead with you to release those men so

that they can go to their families is not because I am afraid of my tormentors" Asari pleaded in the letter. He said the plea to intervene in the release of the Koreans was from "My father His Majesty King T.J.T. Princewill Amachree XI, *Amayangbo* of Kalabari".

However, with the continuous detention of Asari and Alamieyeseigha by the federal government, there is no hope that the end of the hostage war is at sight, despite the recent military offensive. At the moment, there appears to be a crack within the fold of the militant group as different sub-groups have opted to their different ways. A recent release by the Coalition for the Militant Action in the Niger Delta, COMA, said they were not going to take directives from Asari of NDPVF and JRC again as they have become "too soft and too tolerant with the satanic rulers of Nigeria".

The release further stated that the rulers of the Nigerian state must not be reasoned with or trusted. "The recent call off and termination of a planned militant campaign against collaborators of the Nigerian State purportedly based on a direction from Alhaji Mujihad Asari is not only cowardly but against the norms of established revolutionary bodies. In battle, you do not make peace

with an unrepentant enemy".

This presupposes that as COMA goes its own way, they may remain at the other end of hostage-taking. "Let us also announce that our planned campaign will not be subject to the directives of Mujihad Dokubo Asari and we will not listen to his pleas - in the event that we decide to take local hostages".

Meanwhile, arrangements have been concluded for a law that will stipulate a 10-year-jail term for any militant. The executive bill which is already in the National Assembly has it as a criminal offence for anyone that would vandalize or tamper with oil installations and equipment, or to be in unlawful possession of oil pipes.

The proposed law may also repeal the miscellaneous offence Act 2 of 1984 and abolish the life sentence for offences under it. Meanwhile as the soldiers continue in their offensive in Port Harcourt, more oil workers were taken hostage in the Ekeremor area of Bayelsa State. Though it was an aborted attempt, no fewer than 12 militants were reportedly killed on Monday, August 21. The shoot out occurred at the Peretorugbene area of Ekeremor between an alleged armed gang and the members of the Joint Task Force, JTF.