

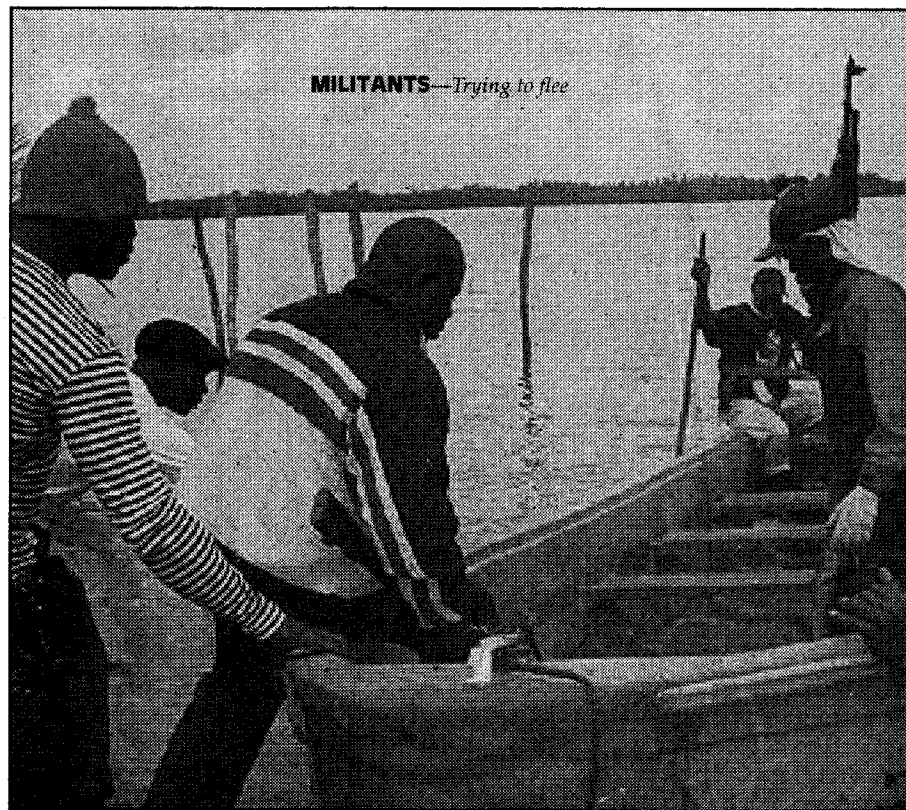
CRACKDOWN ON CULTISTS

BY DANIEL ABIA

The biblical allusion that there is no peace for the wicked appears to be the slogan of the Joint Task Force, JTF whose mission is to flush out cultists in Rivers State. The recent onslaught by soldiers in the city of Port Harcourt has driven the cultists to the remote villages apparently to regroup and fight back. Gokana Local Government area could be one of such places.

Last week, soldiers stormed the Bodo community of the LGA and engaged both Degbam and Dewell cult groups in a fierce battle. Soldiers deployed helicopters and gun boat to bomb suspected hideouts of the groups some of whom fled to the creeks. Eye witnesses told this magazine on telephone that the Degbam cult group was burying one of their members suspected to have been killed in a clash with a rival group when member of the JTF got the wind of it and invaded the community in a commando-like manner. But before the arrival of the soldiers, the miscreants had found their way into the creek from where they were retaliating the military bombardment. Sources said no fewer than 17 people must have lost their

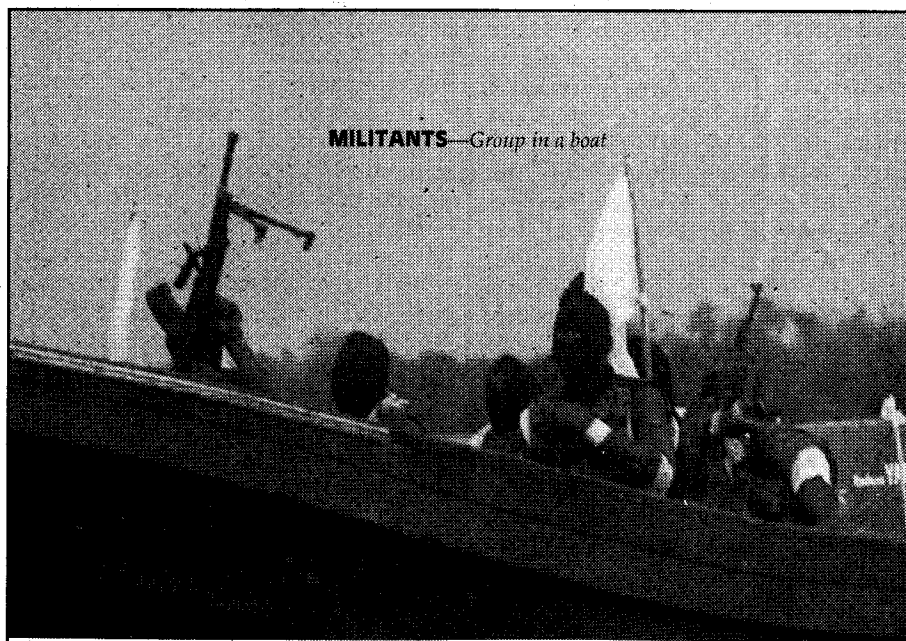
The military Joint Task Force spreads its dragnet to the rural areas in a bid to flush out cultists in Rivers State



lives in the renewed attack in Gokana.

Bodo has been a notorious community in the history of Rivers

State in recent times. Only in February this year, it was embroiled in a communal clash with the neighboring



ODILI—Former governor of Rivers State

community of Mogho. More than 60 people died in the week-long fight including an aged woman who was beheaded in a farm near the Mogho boundary. About 500 houses were also burnt by irate youths from both communities. The recurring crisis in Gokana has been attributed to two major factors of chieftaincy struggle and supremacy of cult groups. And in all cases, prominent politicians from these communities particularly those that served in the last government of Dr Peter Odili have always been fingered as those who fan the embers of crisis in the area for their selfish political gains. Despite the glaring accusations, security agencies are yet to bring any of the persons to justice. And this laxity has been giving the cult boys who are at the beck and call of such politicians the leverage to consistently wreak havoc on anybody that impinges negatively on the political interest of their masters. The trend has been on for a long time until the recent invasion by the military. A source said soldiers are now conducting a house-to-house search with the view to combing out any suspected cultist.

Sadly, several people including the traditional ruler of Mogho, HRH



Dandeson Opbe, were forced into exile by the activities of cult groups in the community. The monarch narrowly escaped death by a group of about 20 suspected cult boys who stormed his palace at 10pm. "They came to assassinate me", he told this magazine in an interview at Eleme where he was taking refuge. Findings revealed that those who fled the community following the February clash were yet to return to their homes for fear of being killed by the cultists. But with the presence of soldiers, it is evident that normalcy will soon return to the place and social life will hit back to top form.

Also in Rumuekpe community in Emohua Local Government area, at least 30 people were killed in a cult fight that also saw the destruction of several houses. Indigenes of the community suspected the Soboma Goerge-led outlaws cult group as the initiators of the fight which many saw as a reprisal attack to the heavy fighting power of the JTF. The Rumuekpe crisis was linked to both chieftaincy tussle and leadership of the youth council in the area. One Mr Golden, a youth leader, was earlier shot dead in his house by suspected rival cultists. His lawyer and wife were also killed by the same group and his house damaged.

The recent carnage in Rumuekpe was earlier blamed on the JTF. But Major Musa Sagir, the Army spokesman quickly debunked the insinuations. He said his men were yet to leave Port Harcourt for the area, hence, the shooting at Rumuekpe was the activity of cultists. It was alleged that some cult groups were planning to storm some parts of the state particularly Tombia in Army uniform to wreak havoc on innocent citizens. The JTF said it had put everything in place to check the excesses of the cultists in the state.

Meanwhile, the new commander of the JTF, Major General Adamu Ibrahim, has cautioned his men not to harass residents of Port Harcourt by asking them to raise up their hands at roadstocks. It has become a routine in the city to see people raising their hands for a thorough search by members of JTF. Addressing members at the parade ground of the 2 Amphibious Brigade, Bori camp, Port

OMEHIA—Executive governor of Rivers State Harcourt, the new GOC said "we are not in a state of war and you are not an occupational force". General Ibrahim told the soldiers to desist from applying *Koboko*, (horse whip) on the people in the name of maintaining peace and security in the state. "The use of *Koboko* and forcing of people to raise their hands should stop", he said, noting that "you are disciplined soldiers and you are dealing with your own citizens"

General Ibrahim explained that 99 percent of the citizens in the state are law-abiding citizens. "We are to maintain peace so that Port Harcourt can come back to normalcy".

According to the GOC, the soldiers will be in the state until peace is brought back. He however warned them that any officer or soldier brought to him on grounds of gross misconduct would be summarily dealt with.

Residents of the city were already fed up with the activities of some soldiers who they said were extorting money from motorists. Both cyclists and taxi drivers were complaining against the payment of N200 per trip to the JTF at any checkpoint. Police in its recent release cautioned the members of the public to refrain from giving bribes to soldiers.

