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How Sea Pirates Unleash Terror Along Bayelsa Waterways, Creeks

By Osa Okhomina

— Aug 16, 2014 | 1 Comment

When the Federal Government decided to offer Amnesty to Militants in the Niger Delta, many indigenes of the coastal communities breathed a sigh of relief as marine transport became a thing of pleasure devoid of kidnapping, shooting and theatre of war between armed youths and the men of the Joint Military Task Force code named Operation Pulo Shield. However, OSA OKHOMINA, reports that the joy of indigenes of coastal communities in Bayelsa is turning to fear, despondency and killings of loved ones by suspected sea pirates.

Investigations by LEADERSHIP WEEKEND show that despite the recent laws passed by the state house of Assembly against kidnapping, cultism and other violent crimes in the state, the suspected sea pirates have become lords along the waterways and creeks.

While in some cases they have been suspected to have been involved in kidnapping of parents of state government officials and some expatriates, the sea pirates have become a source of misery to business men and women from the coastal region.

In the failing battle against sea piracy, the Bayelsa State Commissioner for Transport, Marie Ebikake, announced the acquisition of 20 armoured vehicles and boats by the state government in its bid to counter rising cases of sea piracy and crime in some parts of the state. Marie Ebikake said 15 armoured security patrol boats were bought at the cost of N339million.

The JTF and other security outfit also met and declared a dusk to dawn curfew on movement along the waterways and creeks of Bayelsa as part of the new security action against sea piracy and kidnapping in the state.

The curfew, which was announced yesterday by Air Commodore I.H Ekpa while representing the Commander of the Joint Military Task Force, General Emmanuel Atewe at a one-day security summit organised by the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), was declared with the approval of the State Government.

According to Atewe, "we want to seize this opportunity to announce to you that the Bayelsa state government has directed us to stop all forms of sea robbery and by that, stop all movement from 6pm."

"Please let me say it here because it is an auspicious occasion for us. Movement on waters by night should stop henceforth because we are recording fatalities, there are a lot of sea robberies these days; we want to prevent that, at least for now and if you see any one of our operatives on the waterways, please cooperate, identify yourself, thank you very much", Atewe stated.

He said the curfew became imperative as a result of the ongoing sea robberies on the waterways and to enable his men police Nigeria waters effectively in the face of recent threats in the waterways including oil theft and illegal bunkering.

But the different strategies seem to have failed and the sea pirates are having a field day.

While many have been robbed at gun point with boat engines stolen by the sea pirates, the fold of Brass and Nembe indigenes were thrown into mourning following the violent attack on a passenger boat along the Ogbia and Nembe waterways, shooting dead two persons including an aide to the Former Information Commissioner in the State.

Also shot but not dead were a leading House of Assembly aspirant from the Brass area of the State, Mr. Alfred Watson Belemote, his police escort and a boat driver.

The deceased aide, Mr. Awotimigha Iyabi, was in his early 40s and had served the Former Commissioner, Chief Nathan Egba as Personal Assistant. He was married with four kids.

LEADERSHIP WEEKEND gathered that the gunmen, numbering about six and armed with sophisticated weapons, attacked the Speed boat carrying the deceased and four others from Nembe.

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According to eyewitness account, the gunmen were operating along the waterway and dispossessing boat passengers of valuables and money. It was gathered that the boat conveying the deceased ran into the robbery operation and were attacked by a volley of gun shots from the gunmen.

While some persons claim the armed men were suspected pirates, others claimed the gunmen were laying ambush for the boat conveying the deceased and his friend, Alfred, who is a recognised contender for the State House of Assembly election in the state.

"It was at that point they sighted the second boat and opened fire. The Mobile policeman attached to the aspirant put up a good fight by shooting back. But the fire power of the gunmen was huge."

Confirming the incident, the Former Commissioner for Information and Orientation, Chief Nathan Egba, who led journalists and friends of the deceased on a condolence visit to the wife, expressed shock at the attack and described the deceased as a "non-violent man and gentle".

The State chapter of the Maritime Workers Union have also had a taste of death in the hands of the sea pirates. A passenger boat driver identified as Sun Ebi was shot dead by armed men suspected to be sea pirates along the Brass waterways.

The boat driver was lost in the river alongside other passengers of the attacked boat and was discovered dead by drowning few days later.

Speaking on the development, the Chairman of the Brass District of the Maritime Workers Union, Comrade Magnus Angel described the attack that led to the death of the boat driver as shocking. According to him, the passenger boat was attacked along the Brass waters on Tuesday at about 6pm.

According to Angel, "the passenger boat was traveling from Yenagoa to Brass when the armed pirates attacked. In the ensuing confusion, passengers jumped into the water, while the pirates ransacked their belonging and fired sporadically. After the pirates left, the passengers resurfaced from the waters and joined the attacked boat."

He pointed out that it was at the point of contouring the disturbed journey, the passengers realised that the boat driver was missing, "the Maritime Unions and others searched for the body. He told LEADERSHIP WEEKEND that another group of armed sea pirates attacked another boat along the Ogbolomabiri area of Nembe waterways few days later but no life was lost.

Comrade Magnus Angel challenged security agents and the state government to save the indigenes of the coastal communities of the state from the recurrent incidence of Sea Pirate attack,"Bayelsa government should take proactive ways of ensuring the safety of lives along the waterways of the state.

Hundreds of travellers and members of the Maritime Workers Union in Bayelsa State have cried out over the rising cases of armed attacks and indiscriminate killings by suspected sea pirates along the waterways of Nembe and Brass areas of the State.

While the boat drivers under the Maritime workers Union have planned an emergency meeting to review the situation and possibly down tools over what they described as "poor" security situation, the indigenes of coastal communities of Brass and Nembe area of the state are helpless and are killed by sea pirates.

LEADERSHIP WEEKEND gathered that though the Marine component of the State Security Outfit known as Door Akpor were deployed to the waterways and creeks by the state Government, they have resorted to escorting passengers and market boats leaving the business district of Twon Brass.

It was gathered that due to the shortage of logistics and personnel to the state security outfit, the sea pirates are having a field day by attacking passenger boats and killing innocent travellers including the Friday killing of three persons including the aide to the Former State Commissioner for Information, Awoinigha Iyabi.

A Civil Right Activist and State Coordinator of the Environmental Right Action(ERA),Comrade Morris Alagoa,who confirmed the rising fear along the waterways of the state, described the situation as sad.

According to Morris Alagoa, the insecurity along the waterways is concentrated along the Brass, Nembe and Southern Ijaw area of the state, "while we appreciate the efforts by the state and local government councils, it is important for the authorities to redouble their efforts and beef up the inadequate logistic in place. Funds should be mobilized to take care of equipment and men go after the sea pirates."

"Communities harbouring these criminals should be identified and turned over to the police, JTF and Marine Police check points should be beefed up. Those arrested should be prosecuted. The action of these criminals is creating high sense of insecurity and tourism can never thrive in such environment. Again, greater parts of Bayelsa is riverine and foreign investment can never be encouraged in the midst of killings and insecurity

Responding to the cry of the people, a detachment of the marine components of the Bayelsa State Police Command and soldiers attached to the Joint Military Task Force code named Operation Pulo Shield that tried to launch an attack on the suspected sea pirates along the Gbarain and Ogbainbiri communities of Southern Ijaw Areas of the state were engaged in gun duel.

While the State Police Commissioner, Hillary Okpara, confirmed a gun duel with sea pirates along the Gbarain area, the spokesman of the JTF, Lt. Col. Anka Abdullahi confirmed that the suspected sea pirates engaged in gun duel with the soliders in an attempt to overrun a flow station in Ogbainbiri.

While the JTF confirmed that a staff of an oil service company sustained gun shot injury, the Police Commissioner said though number of casualty could not be confirmed, some sea pirates were killed.

It was learnt that the pirates stormed the rig operated by Lone Star Drilling Company about 2AM. A security source who pleaded anonymity said immediately after approaching the area, the pirates opened fire on the facility.

He said the pirates erroneously thought that the policemen on duty were sleeping because the time they arrived the area. He, however,

said: "Their main target was to remove the weapons attached to a gunboat used for protecting the rig. They wanted to steal the guns in the boat".

He, however, said the policemen were at alert and immediately replied the bandits with a volley of bullets. He said the policemen sustained the shooting until they repelled the attack.

"All I can tell you is that some of the pirates must have been hit by the police bullets. They were in the river and it is believed that those who were hit must have fallen into the river. It is expected that their bodies would float after two days", he said.

He added: "The pirates had come with the intention to remove the weapons, very sophisticated ones, on the gunboat.

"They came with generator and electric filing which they intended to use to remove the weapons if they had succeeded in their operation. Unfortunately, they were repelled by the policemen guarding the rig.

"In fact I was proud of the way the police were able to repel them. I think that will send signal to others that it is no longer business as usual."

But it was learnt that despite reported killing of some of the bandits, the hoodlums reinforced and came back at about 6am. The policemen who were said to have remained vigilant engaged them in another round of gun duel and forced them out of the area.

"The pirates came with electric filing and a generator. Their aim of coming with those tools was to use the electric filing to fire the machine that would be used to sever the chain used for securing the gunboat to the rig."

"Fortunately, the policemen attached to the rig were there. After serious exchange of fire, the pirates abandoned the rig. The pirates again came back around 6 am, probably thinking our men had gone. When they sighted our men, they ran back and some swam in the river to escape."

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