

Gunmen kill five, kidnap three

BARELY 24 hours after unknown gunmen abducted a German oil worker in Port Harcourt, the Rivers state capital, another tragedy hit the state as five other oil workers of Nigeria origin, were reportedly gunned down by suspected armed robbers in another part of the state.

Added to that was the abduction of another three Filipino staff of Overseas Technical Services from Bonny on Friday by unknown gunmen, in a style resembling what happened on Thursday when the German oil worker was kidnapped.

It was gathered that the five men killed by suspected armed robbers late Thursday, were contractor surveyors of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC).

According to SPDC officials, the men were returning to their base after work, when they were ambushed and killed by gunmen along Egbema/Aga Road in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni local government area of Rivers state.

It was not possible to get the particular take-off point and base of these men because both Shell officials and the state's police command said information about the incident was still sketchy at the time of filing this report.

However, in a related development, the three

Filipinos, staff of Overseas Technical Services, were kidnapped from Bonny Island, Bonny local government area of the state in the early hours of Friday.

It was further gathered that the abducted Filipinos were on their way to work when their kidnappers stormed around the Monkey Village area of the Island.

Sources said that the assailants invaded the Island at about 7am from the seawards, with heavy arms, and wasted no time in forcing their targets into their boat and sped off back into the sea.

When contacted, the Commissioner of Police, Rivers state, Mr. Samuel Adetuyi, confirmed the two incidents, but explained that he did not have detailed information yet on them. He also said that more information would be available later in the day and this was not made available till the time of this report.

It would be recalled that this was coming just a day after the kidnapping of the German staff of Billsinger+Berger (B+B), Mr Guido Schillfaiph, who was on Thursday morning kidnapped at about 7am from the Marine Base area of Port Harcourt.

About a month ago, some two Filipino oil workers suffered the same fate as they were kidnapped in Rumuolumeni area of Port Harcourt by some youths from

Clarice AZUATALAM, PORT HARCOURT

Tamatagbodo community in Degema local government area of the state. They looked unkempt and haggard when they were released after about eight days in captivity.

No fewer than six militant youths were feared death in a violent clash between soldiers and armed Ijaw youths, suspected to be members of the militant Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Warri Area of Delta State, on Thursday night.

Similarly, reliable security signal yesterday indicated that the Commander of the Joint Task Force, Operation Restore Hope, Brig. Gen. Alfred Ilogho, and his 2-I-C, Lt. Col. K. Vigo, were on their way out in a dramatic twist to the current face-off between militant youths and soldiers. Our source said their redeployment could be announced today.

But sources told our correspondent yesterday that the six militias were shot dead in a clash between armed youths and soldiers around the Abiteye area in the Escravos Area, where American oil firm, Chevron Nigeria Limited have substantial exploration activities.

Although the true cause of the incident was still hazy at press time, our correspondent learnt that the soldiers stormed a scene of

illegal bunkering activity and drew fire from the gang carrying out the operation at about 23.15 hours on Thursday.

Security operatives claimed that the youths were siphoning crude oil into a barge when the soldiers stormed the area.

In the ensuing gun-battle a MEND source told our correspondent that six of their kinsmen were seriously wounded and feared killed, while others who sustained varying degrees of gunshot wound were being treated locally at an undisclosed location.

Nevertheless, the MEND source, who craved anonymity, said the victim of the shoot out where armless Ijaw fishermen going about their legitimate operation when soldiers opened sporadic fire on them.

In a clear contradiction, our source said the soldiers seized their tugboats, and warned that dire consequences await military men in the area if the vessels were not returned by yesterday night.

Nevertheless, top military officers in the area told our correspondent that the soldiers were attacked while trying to arrest a group of armed persons carrying out illegal bunkering operations in the area.

"They resisted and shot at our men; expectedly, the soldiers had no choice but to return fire in self-defence", a source added.

The Commanding Officer, NNS Delta, Warri Naval Base, Navy Capt. Mufutau Ajibade, who was contacted by our correspondent, said he was not aware of any incident in the waterways.

Ajibade, who said he was returning from the Osubi Airport, where he saw off the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ganiyu Adekeye, promised to get back to our correspondent as soon as he received any information. He had not done that at press time.

Similarly, fresh fears gripped residents of the region last night following the expiration of an ultimatum issued to the JTF by the militias.

Our correspondent learnt that the group gave JTF until 1800 hours yesterday to return a number of barges and tugboats confiscated by JTF in the clash, which led to the death of the gang members.

Meanwhile, our correspondent gathered yesterday that Ilogho and Vigo were redeployed to Bauchi and Nigerian Army Training College, Jaji, Kaduna State, respectively yesterday.

Our correspondent recalled that Ilogho's predecessor in office, Brig. Gen. Elias Zamani, who was the pioneer Commander of JTF, was also removed under similarly controversial circumstances in

February this year, after bombardment of Ijaw community around the Okerenkoko area.

Zamani then, through the JTF spokesman, Maj. Said Hammed, claimed that the attack was targeted at illegal oil bunkers operating in the area.

Although no such incident had been registered since Ilogho came in, four naval men, including a Navy Commander, were killed by armed youths around the Chanomi creek, in the Warri area, last month.

Shortly after the incident, the President, Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Chief Oboko Bello, demanded the removal of Ilogho and disbandment of JTF in the wake of the incident.

Oboko, who acted the mouthpiece of MEND on several occasions, including hostage crisis, said the return of peace in the Warri area negated the continued existence of soldiers there.

Ilogho could not be reached for comment at press time last night, but one of his aides, told our correspondent, "Commander is still around and he is still in command".

Nevertheless, the aide, who craved anonymity, added, "If at all there is such a thing (posting) it can only be for a higher office and not for any other reason".