

Militants kidnap soldier, two others

• Shell halts production at facility

MILITANTS of the previously unknown Niger

Delta Freedom Fighters, who attacked a Royal Dutch Shell PLC oil complex on Thursday fled yesterday, taking three hostages, shooting a man and forcing the oil giant to halt 12,000 barrels of production per day.

The attackers numbering about 14, kidnapped a soldier, an administrative officer and a chef who works at a base that houses staff and stores equipment in Oporoma Bayelsa state, said Joshua Benemesia, who has mediated hostage negotiations in the state.

At least one naval officer was shot in the leg during the attack and badly wounded, Benemesia said.

The attackers also overran an adjacent flow station — a facility where oil pipelines

converge — but withdrew after several hours, Benemesia said.

Shell officials had earlier confirmed the station was occupied. Shell spokesman Bisi Ojedian said it had been shut down as a precaution, cutting production by 12,000 barrels of oil per day.

Attacks on pipelines and oil facilities have cut Nigeria's usual daily output of 2.5 million barrels by about a quarter this year.

Scores of oil workers — mostly local Nigerians — typically live in such compounds. Ojedian declined to say how many people had been in the facility.

Bayelsa Police Commissioner Hafiz Ringim said earlier yesterday that the Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Niger Delta was planning to regain control of the oil complex.

Benemesia — head of a

government-funded group that is attempting to curb attacks in Bayelsa — said he had not seen the assault himself, but had talked to members of his group at the scene. He did not have exact details on the number of attackers involved but said there were around 14.

The group called itself the Niger Delta Freedom Fighters, Ojedian said. He did not say if the group had made any specific demands.

Nigeria is the fifth-largest supplier of oil to the United States, and attacks in the Niger Delta have often moved world oil markets.

This latest incident occurred as the oil-exporting cartel Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) wrapped up a meeting in Abuja. On Thursday, the group said it planned to cut output in early 2007, pushing oil prices above \$62 a barrel.