

# Battle-ready soldiers patrol Port Harcourt

## ■ Govt rejects calls for state of emergency in Rivers

**S**OLDIERS in their all-green combat fatigue, armed with AK-47 rifles, paraded Port Harcourt yesterday.

They ordered residents - who ventured out of their homes to raise up their hands while passing

By Clarice Azuatalam, Port Harcourt, Edo Ugbagwu and Lateef Ibrahim, Abuja

through the streets. Those on motorbikes were forced to disembark and raise up their hands as a symbol of peace.

It is all in a desperate bid

to retrieve the city from unknown gunmen who have killed no fewer than 15 residents in orgies of violence.

The soldiers were seen mostly in Town and Diobu - usually the flashpoints of violence, especially during

the six-day non-stop shootings that caused great panic among residents.

The soldiers frisked passers-by, interrogating them.

Soldiers have also taken charge of the security at the Government House, Port

Harcourt.

The private residence of the former governor of the state, Dr Peter Odili, on Birabi Street, new GRA is also under guard.

The Acting Inspector General of Police, Mr Mike Okiro, was in the state last

weekend along with Chief of Defence Staff Lt.-Gen. Andrew Azazi. After meeting with the Governor, Sir Celestine Omechia, they told the press that the shootings and killings that had ravaged Port Harcourt for

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six consecutive days did not warrant imposition of a state of emergency - a position the government defended yesterday.

No gunshot has been heard in any part of the metropolis till the time of this report yesterday.

Mr Segun Owolabi of Rhythm FM, Port Harcourt who was detained by security agents on Saturday has been released.

He was said to have been detained following a programme, "View Point", a discussion/phone-in programme he anchored on Saturday. During the programme, many callers and the discussants called for a state of emergency.

Owolabi was freed late Saturday. He is back on his beat.

The soldiers were also at Njemanze, Emenike bus stop, Udi Street, Azikiwe Street, Lagos bus stop, Borikiri etc.

Residents hailed the deployment of troops, saying it would boost security.

"We want to beg that the soldiers should not be in a hurry to leave. At least now, we are sure of our lives. We are free from the senseless killings that had been the portion of the state since Monday," a resident said.

Port Harcourt sank into lawlessness last week when between Monday and the weekend, gunmen killed many residents. They were shot at bus stops, markets and other public places.

Last Saturday, two public buildings - Radio Rivers 2 and the NNPC Mega filling station - were torched by suspected cultists.

The Democratic Peoples Party (DPP) called for a state of emergency.

The DPP, in a statement yesterday by its National Director of Publicity, Alhaji Ismail Sani, observed that the state government had failed in its constitutional responsibility

of providing security for lives and property and, therefore, requires another authority that would immediately take charge until normalcy returns.

The Party said: "The fact that militants now operate with impunity, killing of innocent people and destruction of properties with explosives shows that there is no government in the state.

"These same miscreants were reported to have killed at least 18 people over the weekend and at a time the Chief of Defence Staff and the Inspector General of Police were in the state for a discussion on the alarming security situation."

The DPP, which admitted that declaring a state of emergency in a democracy is unpopular, however said that the situation is entirely different as those at the helm of affairs were, in its view, never elected by the people and therefore, lack the peoples' support and respect.

But Information Commissioner Mr Emma Okah denounced such calls as mischievous.

Okah spoke with journalists in Lagos where he blamed the problem on what he called illegal oil bunkering.

The violence, he said, is basically the fall-out of territorial tussle between criminal elements and cult gangs in the state over the control of the bunkering business.

Instead of emergency rule, Okah implored federal authorities to increase the level of security in Port Harcourt.

Said Okah: "It is the Federal Government that is in control of the police, the Navy, the Army and the armed forces in general.

"The security agencies are not in our control. The most we can do is to assist these agencies, which we have done and are still doing.

"We acquired Armoured

Personnel Carriers (APC), bullet-proof assault speed boats and we have continued to support in cash.

"So we have always done out best, but as you know, we don't control the security agencies, that is why the Federal Government must do more and do so urgently too.

"We have from our investigation found out that illegal oil bunkering is the major problem fueling the violence.

"We have told the Federal Government to stop the activities of illegal oil bunkering because it is those that buy oil illegally from these bunkering that supplies the cult gangs and militants sophisticated weapons which most often, our security agencies are

unable to match, in terms of their fire power.

"If the illegal oil bunkering is addressed, it will drastically reduce militancy in the region."

Okah also sees political motives behind some of the violence. As a panacea to this, the Governor Okah said, invited other stakeholders in the state to join him in running the state.

Omehia, the commissioner said will not be blackmailed by those who seek to occupy the Government House through the back door.

"Those calling for a state of emergency are the ones funding and sustaining the militants.

"Emergency rule can surely not address the

problem, more so, the problem did not start with Omehia's government.

"The call for emergency rule is unnecessary, ill advised and is an attempt by those who did not win election in the state to enter through the back door.

"The Rivers State government will never be intimidated by anybody, no matter by what we were voted into power to do."

The Action Congress (AC) last night disagreed with those calling for emergency rule in the state.

The imposition of state of emergency, AC said, was not the solution to the problem.

The party canvassed for the election tribunal to hasten up with delivering judgment on the petitions

before international, local observers and even peoples reports on the election.

In a statement issued in Port Harcourt by its spokesperson in the state, Chief Eze Chukwuemeka Eze, the AC admonished the government to be proactive in handling security matter. It noted that three weeks after it raised the alarm on threats on the lives of some of its officials, "the security organisations in the state have neither issued a statement nor enlightened us on how far they have gone in their investigations or provided us with security. Perhaps government is waiting for when any of us is harmed and it becomes front-page news before it acts."

## AC, CNPP call for probe of Obasanjo, Kupolokun

From Yomi Odunuga,  
Abuja Bureau Chief

ism is that the same Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, who doubled as president and Minister of Petroleum with his co-travellers in the NNPC, subverted this noble promise by fleecing away and squandering the oil windfall.

"Chief Obasanjo, through outright intimidation and coercion watered down the oversight powers of the National Assembly, neglected the patriotic advice of Revenue Mobilisation, Allocation and Fiscal Commission (RMAFC) and ran the oil industry as a private estate. He called the shots, approved sales of crude, over invoiced refinery rehabilitation, float stations, mega stations, importation of fuel at cut-throat prices for domestic consumption and banked in rogue accounts and expended the proceeds at will".

Quoting Obasanjo's statement that "Nigeria has no business with poverty. With our human and material resources, we shall strive to eradicate

poverty from our country. Nigeria should in the next four years, be assured of at least the basic necessities of life," the CNPP said it was shameful that the same administration could inflict an unprecedented suffering on the populace.

Noting that Kupolokun's removal as NNPC boss was mere scratch of the rot in the corporation, the party urged "President Yar'Adua to as a matter of urgent national importance, direct the EFCC to embark on a thorough investigation and prosecution of the masterminds of the mind boggling primitive accumulation and executive stealing of our oil revenue windfall.

The Action Congress (AC) called for an urgent investigation of published reports quoting the US Justice Department as saying officials of the NNPC, PDP and the Federal Government were bribed to the tune of millions of dollars in connection with the \$387 million Eastern Gas Gathering System Project.

In a statement issued in Abuja yesterday by its National Publicity Secretary, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, the

party said the investigation must include the claim by the Justice Department that a US oil services company, Wilbros, also bribed Federal Government officials.

It also called for an audit of the accounts of the NNPC from 1999 to date, in view of recent revelations that top officials of the corporation fleeced the country of billions of naira through various scams, including producing crude oil far in excess of assigned OPEC quota.

The AC said the handling of the allegations would be a litmus test for the Yar'Adua administration in its avowed commitment to the fight against corruption.

The party said it expected the EFCC to swing into action to expose those involved.

"We can see a similarity between this case and the PTDF issue, since both originated in the US.

"Therefore, the EFCC must replicate the alacrity with which it handled the PTDF issue, even when it involved a sitting Vice President."