

They dare death for 'free' fuel

Armed soldiers, riot policemen and community leaders provide cover for people scooping fuel from vandalised pipelines in some communities in Delta State. **SHOLA O'NEIL** reports.

A NURSING mother, expectant women, armed soldiers, riot policemen and community leaders were among scores of people scooping petroleum products from vandalised pipelines of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) in Oghara, Okwejeba and Adeje communities in Delta State yesterday.

Oghara, the Ethiopian West Local Government Council headquarters, was a beehive of activities as hoodlums, community youths and security agents threw caution to the wind and swam in a sea of petroleum product suspected to be Automotive Gas Oil (AGO) gushing out from one of the sabotaged pipelines.

The Nation gathered that pipelines of the Pipelines and Product Marketing Company (PPMC) conveying refined petroleum products, crude oil and liquid gas were attacked by vandals at about 50 points across three local government areas in the last 48 hours.

The development came on the heels of a fire outbreak at a pipeline in Adeje in Okpe Local Government Area on Tuesday.

Although no casualty has been recorded at any of the sites, there were fears yesterday of an impending catastrophe similar to that of Jesse in 1998 in which scores of people died.

Our correspondent, who visited the scene of the Tuesday fire outbreak at Adeje town, observed that some youths defied smoke and smouldering fire to scoop products suspected to be kerosene.

It was gathered that no official of the NNPC had visited the scene of the fire, which was put off by a downpour on Tuesday.

"But for the downpour", Mr. James Ibonoje, Chairman of Okwejeba Community told our correspondent, "You could have met the areas still burning. Nobody came here to put out the fire."

The NNPC office in Warri was yet to react to the incidents as at press time yesterday.

The scooping of kerosene continued at Adeje yesterday. A high tension cable dangling precari-



Youths scooping diesel from one of the spots

Seven oil bunkerers burnt to death in Rivers

SEVEN suspected illegal bunkerers have been found dead in Rivers State.

They were said to have died on Tuesday when a petrol tanker exploded in Soku and Billie, two riverine communities. Several others were burnt.

The accident came to the open when many relations of the dead and wounded thronged the Braithwaite Memorial Hospital (BMH) to check on the bodies and those receiving treatment.

While police sources said the explosion had "not been incidented in the office", a naval source said the fire was a consequence of "our intensified operation to stem bunkering which has become endemic in that area."

From **Clarice Azuatalam, Port Harcourt**

While some of the wounded were hospitalized, relations of some of the dead have secretly buried them.

To evade arrest from security operatives, some of the wounded who were receiving treatment at BMH have moved to private clinics and herbal homes.

Before the recent incident, naval authorities had arrested no fewer than 19 persons and seized a barge, for illegal bunkering.

While the authorities of the BMH confirmed receiving "two emergency cases of fire-related accident," without knowing where the explosion took place, the state Police Public Relations Officer, Mrs. Ireju Barasua, said: "We are aware of the incident."

ously overhead at the scene of the fire failed to deter the people, who escaped into a nearby bush when the Chairman of Okpe Local Government Transition Committee, Chief Cosmos Ighoraye, visited the scene at about 10:15am.

They engaged in a game of hide-and-seek with Ighoraye, as they would escape to one side of the wide expanse of land and resurface at another side.

A security agent at the scene was forced to fire a warning shot to send the people away.

Ighoraye expressed surprise at the level of devastation resulting from the fire arising from the vandalism of the pipeline. Addressing newsmen later, he expressed the need for more enlightenment campaigns to warn community members of the danger in tampering with pipelines.

At Oghara, our correspondent saw soldiers and policemen actively involved in scooping fuel.

At one of the points, a riot policeman, with an AK-47 gun slung over his shoulder, was seen directing youths scooping diesel from a pit.

When he was accosted by a media aide to Governor Emmanuel Uduaghan, Mr. Linus Chima, who was on a fact-finding mission to the scene, he said he was only maintaining law and order.

The policeman, whose identity could not be confirmed because

he was wearing his shirt inside out, also claimed that he was among security agents deployed to safeguard the pipeline.

Our correspondent saw three soldiers on a motorcycle without number plates, leaving the spill site. Their claim that they had tried in vain to chase away the criminals was debunked by some members of the community, who said the soldiers came to collect money from them.

It became apparent a few minutes later that the security agents where on an illegal duty when officials of the PPMC arrived the scene with two armed soldiers at about 11:25am.

The riot policemen joined the pipeline vandals in a desperate escape-bid that took them into a nearby bush path. They were tipped off by sentries posted some distance away from the scene.

However, a nursing mother, who identified herself as Mercy, was caught by one of the soldiers.

Mercy, who claimed to be engaged in illegal petrol deal because she is the breadwinner of her home, told our correspondent that she delivered a baby two weeks earlier and needed money for its upkeep.

The PPMC official, who came in a blue Toyota Hilux van, marked Abuja BH 873 ABC, however refused to speak with newsmen. He said he was not

competent to comment on the issues.

There were over 200 jerry cans, apparently recovered from other scenes, at the back of the van.

However, our correspondent gathered that officials of the PPMC were having problem checking the spate of vandalism on the strategic pipelines between Warri and Benin.

"From this spot (Oghara) to Pan Ocean, a few kilometres away, our pipelines have been attacked at no fewer than 16 places within the past 48 hours and we are having a problem keeping up with the pace of the criminals," a source said.

The fire outbreak from the vandalised pipeline at Adeje has thrown no fewer than 30 communities in Sapele, Adeje and Okwejeba in Sapele and Okpe local government areas into darkness.

Officials of the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), who visited the area yesterday, could not tackle the problem.

One of the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem, adding: "We thought it was a minor fault, but when we got here, we discovered that a number of insulators were damaged and one of the high tension cables had snapped."