

Navy, militants in bloody clash

ONE Naval man was feared dead and four others injured early yesterday in an attack by gunmen suspected to be militants on an oil vessel belonging to Addax Petroleum on Calabar River, Cross River State.

There were however conflicting reports on the fate of the vessel and other Navy personnel on board.

The spokesman of the Joint Military Task Force (JTF), Lieutenant-Col. Sagir Musa, confirmed the attack on the vessel. But while he said the Navy successfully

From Akanimo Sampson,
Bureau Chief, Port Harcourt
repelled the attack, the French news agency, AFP cited him as acknowledging that the Altra G vessel was hijacked at Scareto rig, near the Okun oil field.

Reports said the attackers came in speedboats, and on sighting the vessel, they opened fire on the oil facility, apparently to force its occupants to surrender. In gallant defence of their post, the Navy personnel opened fire to repel the attackers.

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cross-fire is still hazy. Some accounts said the armed men retreated and escaped from what a source described as "the superior firing power" of the Navy. But others alleged that the vessel was seized by the gunmen, with eight Navy personnel on board.

According to the JTF spokesman, the security personnel were able to repel the attack and consequently saved the vessel from being hijacked by the gunmen. "We are aware of the attack on a vessel belonging to Addax this morning. The naval men on board were able to repel the attackers and stop them from seizing the oil vessel," he told our correspondent. But he could give no details of casualty resulting from the attack.

The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) also reported him as saying in Port Harcourt: "Navy personnel escorting the vessel re-

sponded and foiled the attempt. They (gunmen) did not hijack the vessel; neither did they capture any Navy personnel."

The spokesman of the JTF, which operates mainly in the Niger Delta states of Rivers and Bayelsa, however said the incident was still being investigated. "Although the incident took place in an area outside our jurisdiction, I can confirm to you that Navy personnel successfully repelled the attack on the vessel," he was quoted as saying, adding: "The Navy personnel belong to a unit in Calabar."

But the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) cited an unnamed military spokesman as saying one sailor died in the attack, which left four others seriously injured. This account was confirmed by Addax Petroleum in a statement issued later yesterday.

Reuters quoted a Nigerian Navy spokesman, Henry

Babalola, as saying: "Some naval ratings escorting an Addax boat were ambushed by militants who boarded the ship. There was limited exchange of gunfire because of the combustible nature of the cargo."

Babalola reportedly said the vessel had left the Calabar area and was heading towards Onne, in Rivers State. "We have asked the commander in the Port Harcourt area to send reinforcements to rescue the ship," he was quoted as saying.

The Addax Petroleum statement yesterday reads: "It is with regret that Addax Petroleum reports the death of a Nigerian Navy personnel following the defence of a vessel which had been contracted by the Corporation to provide security services on OML126, offshore Nigeria. During the incident four other Navy personnel and crew were injured.

"Addax Petroleum would like to extend its sympathy and sincere condolences to the family of the deceased over this very sad loss and extend our support for a full and speedy recovery for the injured.

"OML126 is located approximately 90 kilometres offshore south of Port Harcourt, and approximately 40 kilometres from the Nigerian coastline, in water depths averaging 130 metres. At approximately 11:45pm on Sunday, June 8, 2008, the Navy vessel on OML126 was approached and attacked by unknown assailants in two speedboats. The two speedboats departed without any adverse effect on the Corporation's operations or technical infrastructure in OML126. The Navy personnel and vessel have been taken to LNG Bonny Island where the injured personnel are receiving medical attention.

Commenting, Jean

Claude Gandur, President and Chief Executive Officer of Addax Petroleum, said: "We are deeply saddened by this incident and our thoughts and prayers are with the victim's family and those of the injured personnel. Since commencing operations in Nigeria a decade ago, Addax Petroleum has established a practice to proactively build excellent relationships with the local communities and has fostered a climate of open dialogue and mutual respect. We strongly believe that this unfortunate incident was a premeditated act by criminal elements seeking personal benefit, and is inconsistent with the socially responsible relationship that exists between Addax Petroleum and the local communities."

"Full investigations into this criminal incident are underway by local and federal security and government agencies and by Addax