

■ Three killed in attack on Navy

From Clarice Azuatalam, Port Harcourt

B RITAIN struck a deal with Nigeria yesterday to send in military experts ~~who would train and advise troops~~ fighting militants in the troubled Niger Delta region.

The deal followed a meeting in London between President Umaru Yar'Adua, who began a state visit to Britain, and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Brown, speaking on the heels of the meeting, said the arrangement would involve sending British military experts to Nigeria to offer military advice. He told journalists: "The UK will ... work with the government of Nigeria to identify a training and advisory support package which

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Yar'Adua, British PM set to fight 'blood oil'

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could help improve Nigerian capability to improve security in the Delta.

He added: "The security training force that we are talking about will be support for the Nigerians to be able to have trainers and others who can build up capacity locally to deal with the problems of lawlessness that exist in the area," agency reports quoted him as saying.

Also speaking, President Yar'Adua said he had asked the British leader to back a campaign at the United Nations against international trade in stolen Nigerian crude which he has dubbed "blood oil."

The two leaders did not disclose details about the number of British military experts to be deployed or a timeframe when they might be sent in. British officials said this meant "military experts providing military advice" to Nigeria's security forces.

But Yar'Adua said the British assistance would focus on river and maritime security around the Delta, which is the hub of Nigeria's multi-billion-dollar oil and gas operations.

The two countries also agreed to try and identify persons behind the trade in "blood oil" whose proceeds are used to buy weapons for the militants, saying they would use international law to bring the culprits to book.

Yar'Adua said: "Just like with blood diamonds, where the crude is taken, part of the proceeds are used to buy sophisticated weapons which are taken back to the Niger Delta and used to shed the blood of innocent people. These decisions that we have reached today will ensure that Nigeria's oil production and peace in the Niger Delta,

and development efforts in the Niger Delta are sorted out and solved within the shortest possible time."

Ahead of the talks yesterday, Brown had said Britain wanted to help Nigeria tackle the violence in the Niger Delta. The offer elicited a threat by militants to suspend the unilateral ceasefire they had declared and attack British interests in Nigeria.

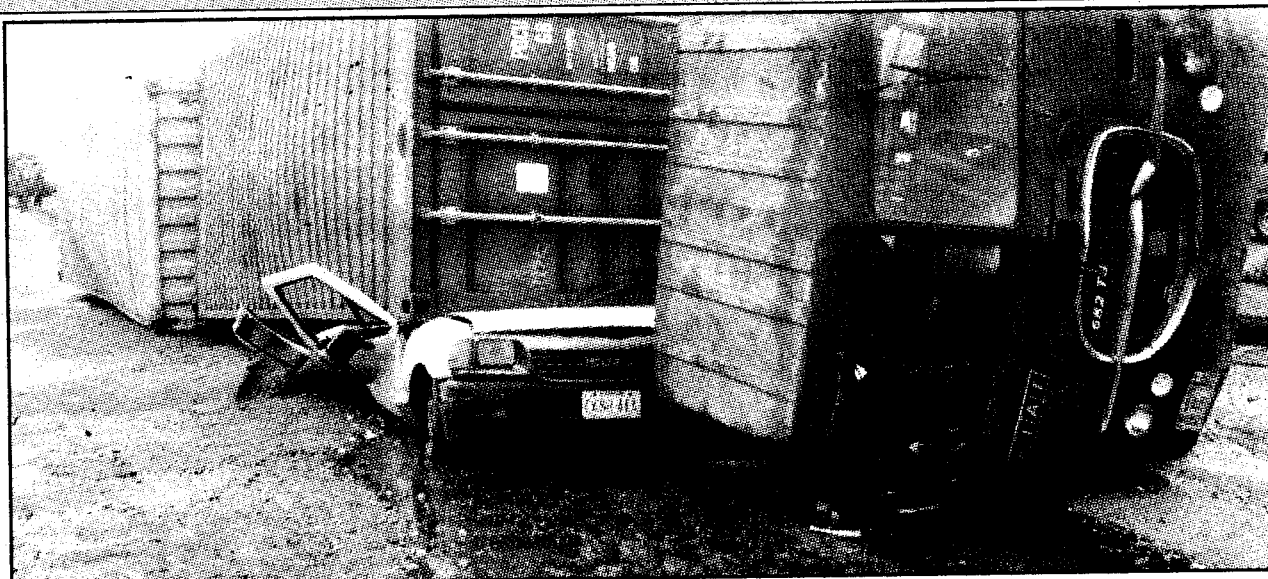
His offer also received a mixed response in official circles. Agency reports cited an official as saying while support from Britain in patrolling international waters could be helpful, any suggestion of military assistance inside Nigeria would be counter-productive.

In an interview with the *Financial Times*, former presidential adviser Dr. Patrick Dele Cole said the theft of Nigeria's oil was fuelling militancy in the Niger Delta. "In exchange for the oil, there are now arms coming in, and in exchange for these arms insurrection is being fuelled. And so you have a vicious cycle," he was quoted as saying.

The violence in the Niger Delta continued yesterday. Three unidentified gunmen and one civilian were killed when militants reportedly attacked a Navy houseboat on Bonny Island, security and industry sources said. They said the gunmen were shot dead by members of the military Joint Task Force (JTF) who repelled the attack on the Orubiri navy houseboat.

"One civilian was also killed during the gun battle between the military and the attackers," an industry source was quoted by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as saying. The soldiers were protecting an Anglo-Dutch oil group facility in Bonny.

Last month two militants and two civilians were killed in two separate attacks in the area.



•Two containers smashed a pick-up van at Ijora in Lagos ... yesterday.

PHOTO: NAN

Osun tribunal judges spirited away from Osogbo

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tions of flirtations between the judges and Oyinlola's counsel Kunle Kalejaiye (SAN).

The ruling seems to have infuriated many, who believe the allegations of bias should have stopped the tribunal from delivering its verdict.

The AC yesterday warned that the judiciary, hitherto the only shining star in an otherwise dark sky, may have its lights dimmed if nothing is done to check the current flip-flop at the election tribunals and contradictory rulings by the Court of Appeal.

"The implication is that the judiciary's ability to remain the last hope of the common man will be eroded, and our democracy will be endangered," the party's National Publicity Secretary, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, warned in a statement issued in Abuja.

It said while Nigerians do not expect much from the executive and the legislature, considering the circumstances under which most of their members attained

their positions, the situation was different for the judiciary, "which has been availing itself creditably until the seeming downturn in its fortunes".

To AC, there are signs that the judiciary has allowed itself to be compromised by a corrupt executive and legislative arms, hence the limited success recorded at the election tribunals are now being eroded at Court of Appeal.

"We are wondering: Have we shouted Halleluiah a little too early as far as the judiciary is concerned? This is because all of a sudden, election tribunals seem to have been hijacked by a desperate cabal in an attempt to hold on to fraudulently-obtained electoral 'victories'; allegations pointing to a compromised judiciary have surfaced, without a concrete evidence to counter such while the Court of Appeal has suddenly lost its appeal."

"For example, non-compliance with the Electoral Act, especially non-availability of result sheets, late arrival of election materials and general malpractices, which were the grounds for which

the tribunal overturned the election of Governor Sullivan Chime of Enugu, were suddenly not deemed substantial enough to show that the election was totally flawed by the Court of Appeal.

"Yet, it is on the same basis of non-compliance with the Electoral Act that the election of Governor Liyel Imoke of Cross River was upturned by the state's election petition tribunal this week!

"In the cases of Kebbi and Sokoto states, the Court of Appeal seemed to have overreached itself, when it pronounced different judgements in two similar cases hinging on the fact that the Governors in those states were not even members of the parties that nominated and fielded them for the elections.

"And in Osun State, the tribunal carried on as if it was actually constituted by Governor Olagunsoye Oyinlola, excluding key evidence from the petitioner with impunity and allegedly engaging in unholy alliance with the Governor's lawyers. Now it has given a tainted verdict that has confounded all observers.

"Judging by the above instances, where then is the much-ballyhooed integrity of the judiciary? Where are the hopes of those who have been short changed by a ruling party that depends on election fraud and violence to perpetuate its stranglehold on power?" AC queried.

The party said while it was aware that the judiciary still harbours men and women of integrity, "all that is needed for its image to be tarnished are the unchecked antics of a few compromised judges, who have no qualms in defiling the temple of justice and trampling upon their judicial oath".

It warned the judiciary to urgently retrace its steps and to ensure that it keeps its head above water in this ocean of despair.

"If those cheated at elections cannot get justice in the courts due to compromised judges, if their supporters are no longer convinced they could repose their confidence in the courts and if the judiciary falls to the level of the executive and the legislature, not much will be left of our hard-earned democracy," AC warned.

Obasanjo didn't consult military on Bakassi says Azazi