

Troops, militants fight

FOR the second day running, Joint Task Force (JTF) troops and Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) militants have clashed in Rivers State. There are claims and counter claims on losses suffered by both sides.

MEND, in a statement by

By Clarice Azuatalam,
Port Harcourt

Jomo Gbomo, its spokesman, said in response to Saturday's attack by the military, the group launched a counter-offensive tagged "Hurricane Barbarossa" with heavily armed fighters in hundreds of war boats filing out from

various MEND bases across the Niger Delta to attack oil industry in Rivers State.

Gbomo claimed that by dawn yesterday, MEND fighters had killed 22 soldiers deployed to guard oil facilities, destroyed oil flow stations, gun boats and pipe-

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lines.

The oil installations, the MEND fighters attacked, Gbomo disclosed include the Soku Gas Plant and Chevron Platform at Kula while a major crude pipeline at Nembe creek was blown up at several points.

According to Gbomo, the counter offensive by MEND will continue until the Federal Government appreciates that the solution to the Niger Delta problem is justice and dialogue.

"This military style bullying belongs to the past 50 years when the Niger Delta people responded only with their mouths, pens and placards."

But JTF spokesman Lt.-Col. Sagir Musa dismissed Gbomo's claims that 22 soldiers were killed, adding that instead the military inflicted heavy casualties on the militants.

"This is another wild propaganda. No soldier was killed as MEND has openly admitted. It's unfortunate they suffered heavy casualties," he said.

The fresh fighting, it was learnt, is a response to Saturday's at Elem-Tombia and Ogboma in Degema Local Government Area which the militants alleged were razed down by soldiers.

The militants alleged that civilian casualties from yesterday's fighting were high, a claim that could not be immediately verified.

Lt.-Col. Musa said Saturday's fighting broke out when fighters attacked patrolling soldiers, who returned fire in self-defence.

He also told journalists that no casualty was recorded in

Saturday's gun fight. But MEND, in a statement released in Port-Harcourt, disputed this claim, alleging that the JTF launched a major offensive with gun boats and helicopter gun ships against its camps, killing three of its members.

MEND threatened reprisal attacks on oil and military installations in retaliation for Saturday's offensive, and asked oil majors in Nigeria to leave the Niger Delta.

Following this warning, fighting between the military and MEND fighters escalated yesterday. Both sides clashed in some parts of the state.

"All international oil and gas loading vessels entering the region are warned to drop anchor in the high sea or divert elsewhere, until further notice. Failure to comply is taking a foolhardy risk of attack and destruction of the vessel.

"Again, we are asking that oil companies evacuate their staff from their field facilities because the brief is not to capture hostages but to bring these structures to the ground," Gbomo added.

MEND said the 27 oil workers who were rescued from sea pirates will be used as leverage to bargain for the release of Mr. Henry Okah, who is standing trial for sundry offences.

"The oil workers, comprising five Britons, South Africans and Ukrainians, as well as 22 Nigerians, were kidnapped from MT *Blue Ocean*. They are trapped in the fighting between its fighters and the military, MEND said.

"Some of the hostages", MEND claimed, are "injured and require medical attention."