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Five killed as militants, JTF engage in gun battle

27/12/2008

Shola O'NEIL

No fewer than five persons, including three armed youths, were confirmed killed when suspected militants invaded a Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) facility in Tebidaba, Bayelsa State in the night of Christmas Day.

Several persons, including four militants and the military Joint Task Force (JTF) personnel, sustained severe gunshot wounds in the ensuing gun battle between the JTF and militants.

The wounded militants were captured and taken to the JTF base in Yenagoa, the state capital, where they are being treated.

There was no report of any damage to the equipment at the oil facility or any of the staff.

It was gathered that the armed youths, suspected to be members of the militant group, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), targeted troops of the Task Force code-named 'Operation Restore Hope' stationed at the facility.

They reportedly invaded the facility in a number of speedboats fitted with dangerous weapons and combat rifles.

Lt. Col. Rabe Abubakar of the JTF's Joint Media Campaign Centre confirmed the attack, saying three militants were killed during the attack.

However, a MEND source, in a telephone interview, said militants "dealt deadly blows on the JTF and their soldiers during the encounter that lasted several hours."

In a text message following our correspondent's inquiry, Abubakar said, "The militants in their desperation and seeking relevance in the scheme of affairs in the Niger Delta have once again launched an unprovoked attack on the men of the JTF who are guarding an AGIP flow station at Tebidaba, Bayelsa State."

He further revealed that the attack, which was allegedly coordinated by MEND, met stiff resistance from JTF's troops who were stationed at the facility at the time of the attack on Christmas night.

"In a serious exchange of fire by our own troops, the militants were compelled to withdraw due to the JTF troops' superior firepower. In the ensuing battle, three militants were confirmed killed and four injured militants were captured."

Abubakar, who emphasized that no soldier was killed during the attack, revealed that one was seriously injured.

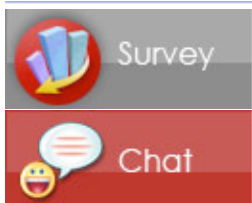
It was further gathered that the JTF Commander, Brig. Gen. Wuyep Rimtip has visited the scene of the clash, where he condemned the attack and vowed that perpetrators would be hounded down.

Abubakar said Gen. Rimtip urged well-meaning members of the public to condemn the attack, especially in the face of peace process towards resolving the problems in the area.

"He, however, assured the public that his men are on top of the situation and there is no cause for alarm."

Abubakar said the JTF would continue to display "professional capability" in suppressing unwarranted

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attacks in the volatile region, adding "The JTF will remain committed to the rule of law and its assigned rule of engagement."

The present rule of engagement, he stressed, emphasized minimum use of force in self-defense where necessary.



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