

Niger Delta crisis

Ijaw chief, six others feared killed, as soldiers, militants clash again

NO fewer than seven persons, including an Ijaw traditional chief, were feared dead yesterday during a bloody gun-battle between troops of the Joint Task Force and members of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in Letugbene Community of Bayelsa State.

The victims included Chief Maureen Kurugbo, who was with JTF troops on their way to arrest suspected MEND mem-

• We were ambushed, but we killed five MEND members – JTF

■ Shola O'NEIL, Warri

bers involved in sea piracy and other criminal activities in the area.

But JTF spokesperson, Colonel Rabe Abubakar, confirmed the death of five MEND members and gunshot wound of a soldier.

Abubakar, in his account of the incident said: "Troops of the task force were ambushed at

about 12:09 today (Friday) by militants from Boyloaf Camp at Ogbotogbo Community in Bayelsa State", adding that it led to heavy fighting.

"As a result, five of them (MEND members) were killed, while a soldier sustained gunshot injuries and has been evacuated to an undisclosed hospital for treatment."

Independent investigations by our correspondent revealed

that at least an innocent victim from the community died in the hour-long shootout which occurred at the community's waterfront, while several others sustained gunshot wounds.

Reliable sources in the Ijaw community in Ekeremor Local Government Area of the state told our correspondent that trouble started in the early hours of the day when some MEND members from Ezetu

Camp allegedly attacked and robbed some traders in the community.

The Ezetu Camp in Bayelsa State is led by outlaw warlord, popularly called General Boyloaf, who had indicated his intention to accept the amnesty offered by the Federal Government.

Apparently unhappy with the development, our source said some vigilante members of the community mobilized and arrested a couple of the MEND criminals and detained them in the community hall awaiting the arrival of the JTF.

"After arresting the boys, the community members called on the commander of a JTF base at the Ramos River and asked him to send men to come and collect the MEND members they had apprehended," our source revealed.

However, before the troops from the JTF Commander, identified as Captain Abdulahi, could reach the community to take

the arrested militant youths, words had reached the leader of MEND in Ezetu about the fate of his boys.

It was gathered that Boyloaf immediately arranged a backup militant team to storm Letugbene to secure the release of his boys before the arrival of the JTF troops.

Unfortunately for members of the community, our source said, the troops from JTF Ramos River base and the armed MEND fighters met at the waterside, a development that led to a heavy shootout.

Eyewitness report from the community indicated that no fewer than three MEND fighters were gunned down by the soldiers troops at the battle scene, while several others fled the scene with varying degrees of wounds.

It was also gathered that at least an innocent community member of the community caught in the cross fire died from bullet wounds sustained.

JTF, an embarrassing failure – MEND

THE Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), has described the Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Niger Delta, codenamed 'Operation Restore Hope', as an embarrassing failure.

In an online interview yesterday, MEND's spokesman, Jomo Gbomo, denied the arrest of any of its members by the security outfit in Bonny

■ Bisi OLANIYI, Port Harcourt

failure.

"Piper Alpha is a hurricane. It leaves a trail of destruction in its wake. So, it speaks for itself. The recent Otunana attack is an example.

"The JTF had to tell unconvincing lies to cover the shame. Is it not Chevron that

rity outfit, signed by Gbomo, said that the ongoing oil "war", tagged, "Hurricane Piper Alpha", was for real.

MEND expressed displeasure over the posting of the JTF's junior officers and men, who were deployed in the Niger Delta to fight an "unjust war" against their fellow brothers and sisters, allegedly for the sake of blood oil.

it will end in a bloodbath to our advantage.

"Our mission is to destroy the facilities that are being used to generate funds to buy bombs to destroy our already traumatised communities and the killing of soldiers becomes necessary only in self-defence.

