

Three feared dead as naval gunboats storm oil-rich Delta community

• Dozens of women, children missing

At least three persons were feared dead and scores missing last night after naval gunboats swept into the waterways of oil-rich Ugborodo Community in Warri South West Local Government Area of Delta State, raining bullets on the community.

The casualties included passengers in a commercial boat caught unawares on the waterways by the invading gunboats.

"You can hear the gunshots ringing out; the Navy are being used to destroy innocent Nigerians that they are supposed to protect," a community leader told our correspondent by phone from Ugborodo last night.

"Some persons have been killed. Some of them were passengers in a commercial boat who were shot by the naval personnel," he added.

Femi Uwawa, another community leader said three

From Shola O'Neil,
Southsouth Regional Editor

Ilajes were killed while going to their home town.

"They were shot by the navy, who are taking their corpses away right now," he said.

Uwawa hinted that the death toll could rise further because of women and children who fled into the bush and jumped into the water to escape from tear gas fired by the military men.

Eyewitnesses said Saturday's operation was launched in three gunboats with 60 soldiers and three officers led by naval captain, shortly after a meeting be-

tween security operatives and leaders of the community.

Residents of Aruton, Ode-Ugborodo said last night on phone that a combined team of soldiers and naval men from NNS Delta and the Forward Operation Base (FOB) in Escravos had surrounded the town and were shooting indiscriminately into houses.

They said the military were being used to silence those opposed to a faction backed by the Delta State Government in the leadership tussle over the Ugborodo Community Trust.

The incident confirms our

exclusive report in yesterday's edition of *The Nation* about an impending military operation allegedly targeting illegal bunkering and crude oil facilities vandals in the area.

Residents said the attack was at the instigation of some of their discredited leaders in collaboration with some officials of the state government.

A prominent leader of the community, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said prior to the invasion, the head of the FOB, in Escravos, Captain Ezetè had led a team to a meeting with the community leaders at the Aruton Public

Field.

He said: "We told him that our people are peace loving people and we want the peace to continue. We only asked that they free our spiritual head, who is languishing in detention because of his opposition to some persons in the community."

"It was therefore surprising when the military went back and surrounded our town, and started shooting indiscriminately into the air. They further fired teargas at our women and children, leading to a stampede."

"I cannot tell you how many persons have been killed at the moment, but the

body of an Ilaje boy was recovered from the sea front and taken away by the navy," one source added.

The Base Information Officer, NNS Delta, Lieutenant Ibrahim Yohanna could not be reached for comment on the development as calls to his telephone line were unanswered.

He had on Friday denied the planned invasion when our reporter called him. He said the troops were only to provide security for a company that was drilling borehole.

At the time of this report, several commercial boats on their way to riverside towns in the area were sent back to Warri by the naval personnel who took over area.

The Ugborodo Community Trust is currently embroiled in a leadership tussle over the proposed \$2.6billion gas plant in the area.

Rivers: Lloyd drags Police, Mbu to Rights Commission