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Bayelsa Community Shivers as Youths Clash with JTF ...

Seven Persons Reportedly Dead

The peace of sleepy Okolobiri community in Gbarain/Ekpetiama district, Yenagoa local government area of Bayelsa State, was last Tuesday shattered when armed youths suspected to be members of 'Egbesu cult' engaged soldiers of the Joint Task Force (JTF) in a fierce gun battle.

At the end of the almost six hour shooting, seven persons, including two soldiers and five youths of Okolobiri were reportedly killed, an eye witness account informed Niger Delta Standard. While the community convulsed under the heavy exchange of fire between the youths and the soldiers, folks scampered into the bush and nearby communities for safety.

As the shooting intensified, staff of the Universal Basic Education Board, Okolobiri, Niger Delta Teaching Hospital (NDUTH) and workers of various oil and construction firms in the community also fled for their dear lives. Niger Delta Standard gathered that the youths were worshippers of the Ijaw god known as Egbesu under the priesthood of King Blue.

King Blue, whose real name could not be ascertained, and the youths operated under the auspices of 'King Blue and His Ijaw Freedom Fighters'. They were alleged to be a group involved in violent crimes within the Gbarain/Ekpetiama axis of the state and other parts of the Niger Delta including the forceful initiation of youths.

It was gathered that the soldiers acted on a tip-off and invaded a 'farm settlement' used by King Blue and the youths for their nefarious activities, just as the youths put up a stiff resistance, leading to a shoot out.

Sources said five of the gun-totting youths were shot dead by the soldiers in a defensive confrontation after they attempted to disarm the soldiers upon their arrival at Okolobiri following a distress call from concerned indigenes of the community over threats to peace and security by King Blue and the youths.

King Blue, who was also killed in the shoot-out, was said to be the god-father of exmilitant youths and armed criminals in the Niger Delta. It was learnt that the corpses of the dead youths were however moved to the headquarters of the state Police Command at about 5.30pm by the men of the JTF in two Hilux jeeps and one Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC).

One of the deputies to late top militant from Odi community, Ken Neweigha was also among those felled by the soldiers' bullet, but it was hazy if the leader of the group, King Blue was among the casualties.

Security sources claimed that the movement of the soldiers to the community was based on a tip off that King Blue and the youths had been causing a breach of the peace of the area and creating discomfort for the indigenes who could not about their normal daily businesses. The police public relations officer, Solomon Omoemin confirmed the incident but was evasive on the causality figure on the side of the soldiers.

Joint Media Campaign Coordinator, JTF, Lt. Col. Timothy Antigha, however, denied the killing of soldiers by the youths, adding that only three soldiers including a lance corporal and two privates were seriously injured in the confrontation.

Lt. Col. Antigha, who spoke to journalists in Yenagoa, explained that contrary to speculations in certain quarters that the troops went on "unassigned mission and engaged in extra-judicial killing", the troops responded to distress calls from the community over threats to life and peace by King Blue and his gang.

"At about 3am Tuesday, the JTF troops, responding to a breach of security in Okolobiri, were ambushed and attacked by cultists. In the ensued fracas, three soldiers sustained gun shot, axe and machete wounds. The soldiers, however, responded professionally and the situation is under control", he said.

The JTF spokesman revealed items the troops recovered from the King Blue's shrine to include dynamite, a membership register of over 45 names bearing January, 2010, as the last date of registration of new members, among others. The wounded soldiers, Lt. Col. Antigha added, were receiving treatment at a clinic in Yenagoa after undergoing surgical operations.

When Niger Delta Standard visited Okolobiri on Thursday, the community was a ghost of itself as several indigenes had deserted their homes while many shops were under lock and key. The paramount ruler of Okolobiri community, HRH Judah Sukurowei, told our correspondent that the incident was sudden, saying he and his council of chiefs were making efforts to ensure the people returned home. "We are not safe. Many people are missing", said Chief Sukurowei, adding that "I was told about five or six persons are dead".

Police Rescue Senator's Mother from Kidnappers

A member of the five-man gang who kidnapped 73-year old Florentina, mother of Senator Emmanuel Paulker was on Wednesday killed during an exchange of gun fire with security operatives along Imiringi road in Yenagoa local government area, Bayelsa State, just as the octogenarian was rescued. Madam Paulker was snatched on Tuesday, February 23, at her residence in Opolo, Yenagoa, the state capital.

The gunmen, shortly after her kidnap, demanded a ransom of N100million and later 20,000 US Dollars. Niger Delta Standard learnt that the state Police command monitored repeated phone calls by the kidnappers in an attempt to get the N100million ransom they had earlier demanded. Pretending to be members of Madam Paulker's relatives, the Police then reached an understanding with the gang of kidnappers to bring the said sum at a location along Mbiama area near Yenagoa, where they had spread their dragnet already.

But no sooner had they got there than the kidnappers diverted them to another location in Imiringi where the police quickly mobilized sensing danger the kidnappers might try to flee from the area, during which a shootout ensued, leaving one of the hapless kidnappers dead, while others fled with various degrees of gun shot injuries.

Confirming the incident, the Police Public Relations Officer, Solomon Omoemin said it was one of those wounded that led them to a nearby bush where the senators' mother was rescued after spending nine days in captivity.

Group to Site Community Radio at Ogbia

Determined to increase awareness on transparency and accountability at the grassroots, Stakeholders Democracy Network, a civil advocacy group in the Niger Delta has concluded plans to site a community Radio Station in Ogbia, Bayelsa State. On completion, the Radio Station would cover all the fifty six communities that make up Ogbia local government area and other neighboring communities.

Presenting the proposal for the radio station to the authorities of Ogbia, during a town hall meeting, the Executive Director of Community Conciliation and Development Initiative (CADI), partners to SDN, Mr. Kelechi Justin said the meeting was to seek the approval and partnership of the people on the possible establishment of the project.

He explained that SDN and partners were ready to provide the equipment and offer training for staff while it is expected of the people to provide accommodation, programmes, and payment of staff salaries when the radio finally takes off, adding that the project required energy and sacrifice of the people to come on stream.

Justin asserted that since transparency was about having access to information, the radio station would help in deepening accountability and transparency at the local government level as well as offer the community the platform to ask their leaders questions and demand accountability, noting that the radio would give voice to the voiceless.

In his comments, contractors of the project, Ms. Anna Bonaldo and Mr. Collins Neil, Sound Engineer and Recorder with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) London, said they have been building community radio stations in tropical Africa and the Middle East. They added that they have discovered that Ogbia community have the same basic needs with other African countries which according to them is the need and desire to express their feelings in their own way.

The contractors described radio as a veritable tool for development as it has the power to unite people through music, folklores, drama and other indigenous forms of communication and assured the people that the radio would be programmed to accommodate the wishes and aspiration of the people, and urged them to be committed to the success of the project.

Responding, the Paramount Ruler of Ogbia Town, HRM James O. Oborise (Obanede I) said as stakeholders, the people will ensure the sustainability of the Radio Station in lieu of its importance to the people of the area, adding that a building have already been earmarked for the immediate take off of the project.

Speaking, a youth leader and Secretary of Supreme Council Out-Adionin Ogbia Advocacy for Culture, Transparency, Peace and Development, a community based organization (CBO), Mr. Atim Atim-King said the youths in area are ready to give themselves to work on the project voluntarily, adding that the radio station will give indigenous musical and artistic talents the opportunity to express themselves.

Igoniko Oduma

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