

'Pipeline vandalism claimed 400 lives in one year'

Continued from | pg 3

are no customers to buy them. They've all fled to safer havens.

"On waterways, some soldiers and naval personnel are harassing villagers who are fleeing. Things are pretty difficult," the youth leader lamented.

Speaking on the soldiers' arrival at the kingdom, one of the villagers and National President of the Foundation for Human Rights and Anti-Corruption Crusade (FHRACC), Comrade Alaowei Cleric, "there was tension as villagers dashed into the woods for fear of attacks and arrests. There is still tension as villagers are either taking refuge in the woods or relocating to Warri."

Lamenting the situation the people had found themselves after the bombings, Comrade Cleric added: "Niger Delta is a peaceful place; we did not expect the recent bombings. It was unfortunate it happened. But the people should not be made to bear the brunt of the sins of the miscreants. Soldiers should fish out the perpetrators alone and stop harassing our innocent villagers."

While the spokesperson for the military Joint Task Force (JTF), Operation Pulo Shield, Lieutenant Colonel Isa Ado, could not be reached for comments, the Commander, Nigerian Navy Ship (NNS DELTA), Warri Naval Base, Commodore Raimi Mohammed, refuted claims that naval personnel were terrorising residents of SandField 1&2, a makeshift settlement located directly opposite the naval base.

Residents of the area had complained that after the recent pipelines bombings which took place kilometres away from their community, naval personnel had been engaged in midnight shootings into the air for reasons not stated.

The night shootings have led to many of the villagers fleeing their homes for fear of the unknown. Recently when Sunday Tribune visited the settlement, only a handful of residents were seen.

Reacting to the allegation, Commodore Mohammed told Sunday Tribune through his Bureau of Information Officer, Lt. N.B. Lamu, that the shootings were part of their routine exercise as a security measure.

He noted that some leaders of the communities were duly informed before the exercise began, saying the mandate of the navy "is protecting life and property and not the other way round as alleged."

Arepo pipeline vandals dare security agents

Arepo, a suburb of Ogun State, seems to have taken the leading position among the communities where pipeline vandalism has continued unabated over the years, thus defying all efforts of the security agencies to nip the act in the bud.

In February, five naval officers were killed just like a pregnant woman who was hit by stray bullet when security agents and vandals engaged one another a few years back. Between February 2015 and February 2016, no fewer than 400 deaths may have been recorded due to the activities of the vandals along that axis. The axis is believed to be notorious for oil theft by vandals who vandalise pipelines belonging to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC).



Arrests, conviction of suspected vandals

On February 29, nine people accused of pipeline vandalism and killing of nine policemen were sentenced to 22 years imprisonment.

A vandal, 23-year-old Idowu Sobijoh, was reported to have stated that his gang was responsible for over 400 deaths between February 2015 and February 2016. He added that over 370 people died during an explosion in July 2015 due to activities of vandals. "Those killed that day were over 370," he said, adding that his cousin, Ayo, who introduced him into the act, also died in the explosion.

"I would have died that day too, but I refused to go with Ayo because I was very tired. We carried the corpses of our people and buried them in three large graves. We counted over 370 corpses. I also saw my brother's corpse because he wasn't burnt completely," he stated.

Govt's efforts to arrest the menace

The former Minister of Petroleum Resources, Diezani Alison-Madueke, made several visits to Arepo while in office and pledged to employ Horizontal Dimensional Drilling (HDD) which will bury the pipelines deeper into the ground, but that was not done until she left.

The present Minister of State for Petroleum Resources, Ibe Kachikwu, was supposed to visit Arepo in late January to inspect vandalised spots; his helicopter only hovered around the community but couldn't land because of security threat. This shows how notorious Arepo is to Nigerians in general and government officials in particular.

The Lagos State governor, Akinwunmi Ambode, on a recent security inspection tour of Owutu, Ishawo, Oke-Oko and other adjoining communities in Ikorodu West

Local Council Development Area (LCDA), stopped at Little Palace Hotel, which vandals once used allegedly as a hideout before it was taken over by the Army, Navy, Airforce and the Department of State Services (DSS) and the police under the code name, 'Operation Awatse.'

The security men told Ambode that during Operation Awatse, 15 suspected vandals were arrested, over 2,000 50-litre jerry cans seized and 36 vehicles impounded. Commanding Officer of 174 Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Julius Ogbobo, told Ambode that the joint forces had discovered Little Palace Hotel, one of the locations the vandals often used to commit their criminal activities in the area.

"Also sir, we have recovered over 36 vehicles and we have more than 15 suspects. Some of them have been handed over to the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) for prosecution and further action. So far, we have tried to garison Ishawo and Arepo, but still the vandals have not relented in their activities," Ogbobo said.

Going forward

Going by the grim news of recurring pipeline explosions due to the activities of

vandals, miscreants and hoodlums in the last few years, it is all too easy to consider that government initiatives to protect pipelines and other oil installations with deployment of security agencies, at best had been ineffectual, and at worst, had actually exacerbated the woes that the intervention was meant to address.

If recent events are anything to go by, several billions of dollars are estimated to have been lost annually to oil theft, while several people have died, many burnt beyond recognition and properties worth billions of naira destroyed in the last 30 years as a result of pipeline explosions.

Arresting the menace has become challenging due to failure of the Federal Government to adopt new technology in monitoring the pipelines that stretched about 5120 kilometres across the country. The Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC), a subsidiary of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), saddled with the management of the pipelines has reportedly failed in its responsibility. The pipelines recorded over 774 breaches in 2015.

The company lacks the capacity to monitor and detect leakages, siphoning of products and breaches. Last month, an illegal oil bunkering site was uncovered in Ogere Water Works in Ogun State by Topline Leighton Limited, a private pipeline security surveillance company under the Pipelines and Products Marketing Company (PPMC).

Five vandals were arrested in connection with the illegal site where over 20 million litres of fuel were said to be stolen daily by vandals.

Similar discovery was made in January far away in the Atlas Cove area, around the Roberts Island in Lagos State precisely. These discoveries were made by physical inspection after tip-offs.

Several billions of dollars are estimated to have been lost annually to oil theft, while many people have died