



JTF soldiers ready to confront the militants

Is the JTF Losing The Niger Delta War?

Militants launch all-out war on oil installations, claiming to have killed many soldiers of the Joint Military Task Force

By Chris Ajaero and Godfrey Azubike

THERE ARE MORE THAN 25 densely populated waterfronts in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital. They harbour both militants and civilians. Houses in these waterfronts are made of wood and corrugated iron sheets while their narrow streets are just wide enough to allow two persons walk pass each other.

The waterfronts sit on swampy or marshy land just close to the river. The river itself is dirty and polluted because of the discharge of solid waste. Two of the waterfronts, namely, the Marine Base waterfront and Abuja waterfront have become notorious because they are considered as havens for the militant gangs in the Niger Delta who recently declared an "oil war" against the Joint Military Task Force, JTF. The battle is

code named *Operation Hurricane Babarossa*.

The unwieldy nature of the waterfronts and the creeks are some of the reasons the JTF is finding it difficult to effectively cage the militants after nearly two years in the area. The waterfronts serve as escape routes for the criminals whenever there is an attempt to attack them.

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Dike: Cautions saboteurs in JTF

Musa Sagir, a Lt. col and spokesman of the JTF in Rivers State, admitted last week, that the shanty waterfronts pose a hindrance and security risk for soldiers in their quest to flush out the militants. He told *Newswatch* that the waterfronts serve as hide-outs for the militants and as exit routes through which they escape to the creeks. "Whenever the criminals are pursued by the JTF and they run down to the waterfront, they escape easily. Once they enter that place, their waiting boats will always be there to take them back to the creeks," he said.

And in most of the battles in the creeks, the militants appear to have the upper hand because they understand the terrain better than the JTF. Sagir told *Newswatch* that the "nature of the creeks is such that you can't go there with the normal gunboat." The approach most appropriate is by air and JTF does not want to launch such an attack because of the collateral damages it would cause to the lives of innocent citizens and oil

installations. "We know they (militants) are in the creeks but people are also living there. Some of the people who live there are fishermen. What do you do to ensure that innocent people are not caught up in the crossfire?... That has been the dilemma of the Niger Delta crisis," Sagir told *Newswatch*.

The JTF's position on the handicap posed by the waterfronts is illustrated in their failed attempt to eliminate Soboma George, leader of one of the militant gangs known as *The Outlaws*. George had escaped death by the whiskers on August 16, last year when the JTF attacked his hide-out in Marine Base, Port Harcourt. At that time when George and Ateke Tom, leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement, NDVM, terrorised Port Harcourt, the JTF had launched a three-pronged attack on George's hide-out with the army on the ground, the navy at the sea and the airforce by air.

George escaped a few minutes before the soldiers struck because he was alerted by informants that danger was lurking. Military authorities were alarmed that George survived the onslaught after the JTF had claimed that he was killed during the operation because both his house located at the Black Man's

Estate, Marine Base and Iyalla Hotel where he reportedly lodged were bombed.

The JTF soldiers received security reports that George escaped through one of the exit routes created by the militants in the Port Harcourt waterfronts. According to them, the waterfronts serve as "observation and exit" routes for the militants whenever there was an attempt by the JTF to flush them out.

Officers of the JTF have made efforts to explain their constraints to the government. Chibuike Amaechi, governor of Rivers State, was recently conducted round the Abuja waterfront by Sarkin Yaki Bello, JTF commander in the state. The tour was an eye-opener for the governor. He saw for himself the "observation and exit" routes created by the militants in the waterfront. *Newswatch* learnt that from the observation posts in the waterways in Abuja waterfront, the militants monitor the approaching JTF patrol boats and vehicles. Whenever they sense danger, they alert their leaders and they escape into the creeks thereby evading the attack by soldiers. This has frustrated several efforts by the JTF to apprehend or eliminate some of the militant kingpins.



Militants vow to destroy oil installations

Newswatch, September 29, 2008

It was against this background that the JTF recently made a case for the demolition of the waterfronts. Amaechi has not made any categorical pronouncement as to whether his administration would demolish the waterfronts or not. But Blessing Wikina, his chief press secretary, told *Newswatch* that the development of the slums of Port Harcourt was part of the urban renewal programme initiated by Alfred Diette-Spiff, first military governor of the state in the 1970s. Wikina was, however, diplomatic in asserting government's position on the issue. He said: "The governor swore an oath to protect lives and properties in the state. And if the waterfronts, particularly the ones identified by the security agents pose a problem to them in their task of effectively caging the criminals, the government will take a decision on it."

Newswatch, however, learnt that Amaechi is hesitant in taking a decision on this issue because of the controversy that trailed the idea in 2007 when Celestine Omechia, his predecessor announced his administration's plan to demolish the waterfronts. Already, some natives of Rivers State have reacted angrily to the latest proposal by the JTF for government to demolish the waterfronts. Chris Ekiyor, president, Ijaw Youth Council, IYC, opposed the proposal. He said if the recommendation was adopted by government, thousands of poverty stricken persons would be displaced and punished for the crimes of a few miscreants. "Demolition is going to create more problems. People that were displaced from Rainbow town were never resettled and their lives have been dislocated. It created more criminals and destitute. For every decision of government, the pros and cons must be checked and we should always consider what is advantageous to the poverty stricken people who are the majority in these waterfronts," Ekiyor said.

Tom, leader of the NDVM, brought an ethnic colouration into the issue. He described the proposal as a programmed attack on the riverine areas of the state; especially the Ijaws whom he claimed own 80 percent of the waterfronts. That is not the only problem JTF faces. Among

its ranks and files, there are also saboteurs. *Newswatch* learnt that some of the bad eggs within the JTF connive with the militants to sabotage the nation's economy through illegal bunkering. It was gathered that some of the soldiers who make a lot of money through illegal bunkering activities work hand-in-hand with the militants and even leak information to them whenever JTF planned to launch an attack on their

camp. Some of the JTF officers were alleged to have become millionaires due to their deals with the militants and are therefore, reluctant to launch attacks on the militant kingpins even though they know their hide-outs in the creeks.

Paul Dike, air chief marshal and chief of defence staff, confirmed the existence of saboteurs within the JTF last Wednesday. During his visit to the JTF camp in Port Harcourt, Dike warned that



Bello (in front) leads combat-ready soldiers to comb the hide-out of militants

military authorities were now fully out to deal with soldiers involved in illegal bunkering in connivance with militants describing it as economic sabotage.

He was emphatic that information at his disposal revealed that a few black legs among the soldiers leak information to the militants thus weakening the position of the soldiers. Sagir also admitted that there are bad eggs within the JTF but said many of them who were found to have compromised were sanctioned. "I can tell you that we have had reasons to dismiss soldiers for various offences. Any soldier who goes against the standing rule guiding our operation in the Niger Delta is dealt with militarily," he said.

One other factor that has prolonged the battle against the militants is the mandate of JTF which is to enforce peace in the Niger Delta. It does not allow them to engage the

militants in a full scale war. Sagir said although they were determined to contain the militants, there is a limit to which they could go in the battle so as not to be accused of staging "a full scale war on the people we are constitutionally empowered to protect."

R a b e Abubakar, co-ordinator of the JTF media campaign centre in Warri, Delta State, also told *Newswatch* that soldiers have always applied caution

while waging war against the militants in order not to harm innocent citizens in the areas where the bandits have their camps. He recalled that recently when the JTF invaded Agge Community in Ekeremor Local Government area of Bayelsa State in a bid to dislodge militants there, many Nigerians condemned their action.

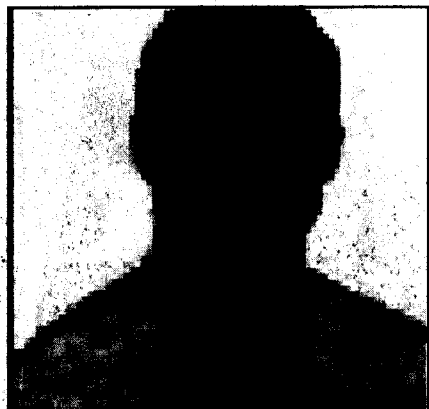


Rimtip: Warns militants

The political ties which some of the militant gang leaders have with top politicians in the Niger Delta have equally made them sacred cows. Sources in the JTF told *Newswatch* that in Bayelsa and Delta states, some public officers hob-nob with the militants and even pay them



L-R: Amaechi and Bello at the Abuja waterfront in Port Harcourt



George: Escaped through the waterfront

huge sums of money monthly to persuade them to remain calm. It was gathered that the relative peace that had been witnessed in these two states in recent times was based on this understanding between the politicians and militant leaders.

According to sources, Government Ekpompolo, popularly called Tomo Polo,

leader of Camp 5 in Delta State, wields a lot of influence among politicians and oil company chiefs who pay him millions of Naira so that he would persuade his fellow militants not to cause trouble. His camp is said to be a Mecca of sorts for politicians who are aware of his ability to control fellow militants. This was why Goodluck Jonathan, the vice-president, allegedly visited Tom Polo's camp in June, last year, shortly after the Umaru Musa Yar'Adua administration assumed office. *Newswatch* learnt that as part of Tom Polo's deal with the politicians, he was given the opportunity to nominate a candidate who is currently serving as a commissioner in the Delta State government.

JTF troops are aware of the unholy alliance between these militants and the politicians. Consequently, they allow such powerful militants to move about freely even though they know they are

criminals masquerading as freedom fighters. This makes the war against the militants complex and complicated for the JTF as they are sometimes warned by politicians to spare the bandits who serve as their loyal political thugs.

Newswatch gathered that it was because Amaechi of Rivers State vowed not to patronise the militants that angered them, hence the ongoing oil war has been restricted to Rivers State.

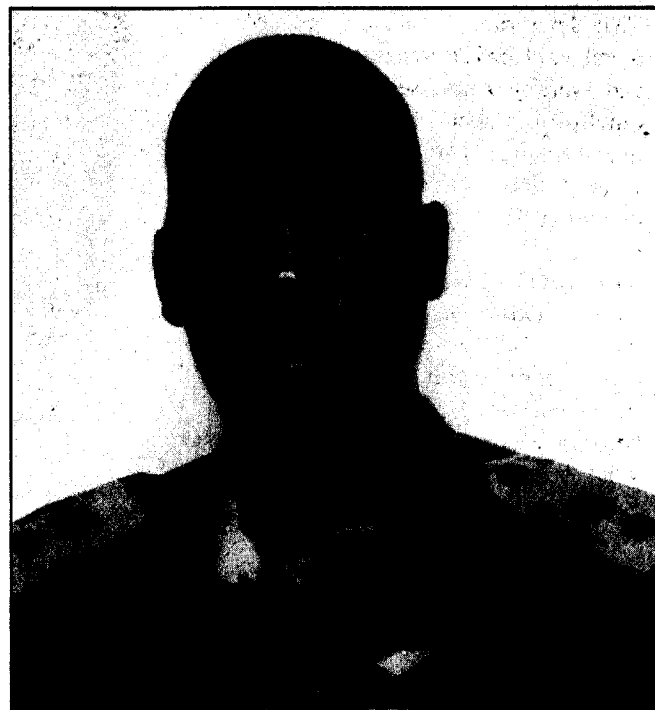
The renewed hostilities by the militants in some parts of Rivers State in the past few days is, therefore, a grand design by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Nigeria Delta, MEND, to make the state ungovernable for Amaechi because he is not patronising them. In a statement issued by MEND when it declared the "oil war" on Sunday, September 14, it said the militants would hold Amaechi "accountable for the genocide."

We've Achieved our Mission in the Niger Delta

Lt. Colonel Musa Sagir, spokesman of the Joint Military Task Force, JTF, in Rivers State spoke to **Chris Ajaero**, senior associate editor, and **Godfrey Azubike**, staff writer, on the renewed insurgence of the militants code named *Operation Hurricane Babarossa*, the efforts of the JTF to cage them and their major constraints in the task of dislodging the militants in the creeks. **Excerpts:**

Newswatch: What actually led to the latest insurgence by the Niger Delta militants which they code named Operation Hurricane Babarossa?

Sagir: In order to checkmate the current sea piracy and other related criminal acts on our water ways, Joint Task Force, Operation Flush Out 3, maintains a regular marine patrol. This is against the interest of the militants because they stopped them from their criminal act which is a major source of their



But Gbomo Jomo, spokesman of MEND explained that the war was in response to what it termed the unprovoked aerial and marine attacks by the JTF on Saturday, September 13, at Elem-Tombia and Ogboma in Degema Local Government area of Rivers State. He threatened all international vessels that approach the region to beware as MEND was determined to carry out destructive and deadly attacks on the oil industry in Rivers State. "All international oil and gas loading vessels entering the region are warned to drop anchor in the high sea or divert elsewhere until further notice. Failure to comply is taking a foolhardy risk of attack and destruction of the vessel," MEND said.

It also advised oil companies to evacuate their staff from their field facilities "because a hurricane is about to sweep through oil installations in the entire Niger Delta." The group



A site at Marine Base bombed by JTF

disparaged the creation of the Niger Delta ministry by President Yar'Adua, saying it was just meant to hoodwink the people of the region.

In order to demonstrate that its threat was not an empty one, the militants

attacked the Soku Gas plant and Chevron platform at Kula, Rivers State on Sunday, September 14. MEND claimed that during the attack, 22 soldiers were killed by the militants. The militants followed it up

money. In one of the patrols by our men along Elem Tombia, the militants opened fire on our men. This inevitably resulted in fierce exchange of fire, and there were massive casualties on the part of the militants. Thereafter, because of the casualties they suffered, they felt pained and as usual they resorted to wild mischievous and senseless propaganda, imputing that the JTF provoked them, damaged their speed boats, and killed innocent people in nearby villages. That is not true. That never happened. We, as members of the JTF are responsible God-fearing and morally sound security outfit. We are mindful of collateral damages that our action or inaction can cause to the people. This was why we exercised professional restraint in this operation. That was exactly what happened.

Newswatch: There have been claims and counter claims as regards the number of casualties on the side of the JTF. What is the true position on the number of soldiers killed by the militants?

Sagir: We have told members of the public that what the militants claimed never happened. Remember, that two or three weeks ago there was a similar fabricated story that 25 soldiers were killed. When I refuted it, even the doubtful mind had no option than to accept because what I said turned out to be true. If our soldiers were killed in the process, there is no reason for us to hide it. It is not a sign of failure, and it's not a sign of our weakness professionally. If our own soldiers were killed, we owe it a patriotic duty to tell Nigerians that during this encounter, unfortunately, a number

of persons were heroically killed in the process. What we do not do is to tell you the identity of those involved. This is because it is not good for their families to hear it on the pages of newspapers. But for the number, we usually make it public. But where we did not lose any soldier, there is no need for us to create wicked propaganda against the people or against the militants. When a soldier was injured in the crossfire, I made it clear that a soldier was wounded, but he is in a stable condition. By the nature of our profession, it is hazardous, it is dangerous, we signed for that and there is no retreat. The typical mindset of a soldier is that he is even happy to taste bullet wound. It is a sign that you are really tested. All of us are praying for the day one would enter the battle field and come out with little bruises, that is the trade mark of a combatant soldier.

Newswatch: In effect, are you saying that no life was lost on the part of the JTF?

Sagir: On the whole, from Saturday, September 16, to date, during the period of this renewed crisis, no soldier was lost in the process.

Newswatch: Why was it possible for the militants to blow up the oil installations as they claimed in their renewed attacks?

Sagir: The fact that MEND sent e-mail statements that something happened does not mean it actually happened. Militants have the right to say, Oh! we have killed this number of soldiers and destroyed oil installations. The issue is, did that really happen? We are on ground. Any oil facility in Rivers State which is in our

with a dawn raid on the oil flow station of Shell Petroleum Development Company, SPDC, in Alakiri, Rivers State. The militants blew up the flow station. *Newswatch* gathered that the attack left many oil workers injured and some dead. This was because the militants detonated dynamites and bombs on the oil flow station.

Following the attack, about 50,000 barrels per day of oil and 120 million cubic feet of gas were shut-in at Alakiri. As a precautionary measure, the SPDC which confirmed the attack down-manned facilities in some field locations in the Niger Delta.

Last Wednesday, the militants continued their offensive as they attacked the SPDC flow station at Orubiri and another one at Rumuekpe jointly owned by SDPC and Agip. MEND claimed that 18 soldiers who were guarding the facilities were killed. It claimed that by



Clark: Calls for ceasefire



Erokosima: Wants amnesty for militants

area of operation, we have our representatives. In other words, we have Joint Task Force troops on duty in every platform, be it flow station or oil pipeline. So if there is any economic sabotage on that platform, they are held accountable. And before anybody could know, they will tell us. Once there is fire, once there is any threat on soldiers' duty locations, they will respond and alert the headquarters. We were not alerted by neither Shell nor our soldiers.

Shell facility was not set on fire by the militants. What happened was that when they attempted to attack the facility, the soldiers on guard heroically and successfully resisted the attempt. Even though the militants detonated dynamite and bombs, the soldiers thwarted the attempt. However, in the process of crossfire, bullets hit one of the most sensitive inflammable parts of the flow station, and by virtue of what it is - gas, it exploded. In other words, a portion of the flow station caught fire, and which was contained even before day break. And Shell made it clear that because of the intense security situation, they proactively took some measures to avert its degeneration. One of the measures they took was that they shut down the flow station. The damage would have been worse if the flow station was running.

Newswatch: What assurance are you giving Nigerians who are apprehensive because of the declaration of all-out war by MEND?

Sagir: Let me correct an impression. The areas that are affected by the resurgence of violence are not in the middle of society. Some are in isolated places. But then, my advice to the larger society is that they should not panic. They should not worry because the JTF, from all indications, is on top of the situation and the situation is under control. That is why, if you go round Port Harcourt city now, either in the day time or in the night, you will find people going about their normal economic and social activities without fear of any molestation. So, people shouldn't worry.

Newswatch: To what extent would you say the JTF has achieved the objectives for which it was deployed to the Niger Delta?

Sagir: Anywhere in the world, the Joint Task Force is an ad hoc arrangement with a time frame and the mandate to achieve a certain mission. And once the mission is accomplished, it is disbanded. We have the mandate to ensure that an enabling environment is created in our area of responsibility which is the Niger Delta so that multinational oil companies, foreigners and other law abiding citizens of the nation

would carry on with their lawful activities. Basically, that is our mandate.

I can tell you that we have achieved our mission to a great extent, minor hitches here and there notwithstanding. Let us look back at the situation in Rivers State during the administration of former Governor Celestine Omechia. There was a major crisis then. Before the JTF came into Rivers State, it was not unusual

They should not worry because the JTF, from all indications, is on top of the situation and the situation is under control

their action, the militants have proved that they were capable of prosecuting the "oil war" against the soldiers.

But Emeka Onwuamaegbu, brigadier general and spokesman of the Nigerian Army, warned the militants to beat a retreat as the soldiers were poised to defend the country against internal aggression. "No matter the increase in the fire power of any group in this country, they cannot overwhelm the armed forces of Nigeria. We are a well-trained group of people... And anybody daring the Nigerian Army or the Nigerian military is just living in a fool's paradise because we are well trained, we are well equipped, we are conducting what we call internal security operations, applying minimum force to contain the situation," Onwuamaegbu said. He urged the Niger Delta people not to panic, as the Nigerian Army was capable of repelling the violence perpetrated by the militants.

Sagir, JTF's spokesman in Rivers State, also dismissed the claims by MEND that it had killed many soldiers in the conflict as mere propaganda. According to him, only one soldier has been injured since the renewed hostilities. He insisted that JTF has not lost any of its men in the "oil war." Sagir advised Rivers people not to be apprehensive because "the JTF, from all indications, is on top of the situation, and the situation is under control."

Although the militants were yet to launch an attack either in Delta State or Bayelsa State, last week, the JTF in Warri has warned the militants to steer clear of all oil facilities in its area of operation or be ready to face the wrath of soldiers. Wuyep Rimtip, brigadier-general and commander of the JTF in Warri, said "any attack against oil facilities or JTF personnel will be tantamount to

to hear sporadic gun shots in the day time on the major streets of Port Harcourt. Equally, it was not unusual to hear gun shots along the major waterways. But as at today, it is no longer so. Look at the issue of sea piracy. Before now people were afraid to move through the waterways. With the arrival of the JTF, the rate of sea piracy has been drastically reduced and that is to the credit of the Joint Task Force.

When you consider the improved security situation in Port Harcourt, you will agree with me that the JTF has brought a semblance of law and order to the Niger Delta. Before now, there was lawlessness and this led to the imposition of curfew in Rivers State.

Another achievement of the JTF is in the area of checking the activities of illegal oil bunkers. Their activities were rampant in Okochiri in Okrika, Soku and Abonnema wharf. Go to these areas now you will not notice any sign of illegal oil bunkering. All these are to the credit of the JTF.

In Soku, the Navy gunboats which are component parts of JTF are there and that is why they have stopped bunkering there. And this has checked the consequences of such criminal acts in terms of fire outbreak. Before now, you always hear of fire outbreaks caused by the activities of illegal bunkers. We have curtailed their activities by 80 percent. There was a time we declared a crackdown on illegal oil bunkering and trade on

condensate which we did with passion. We are aware that illegal bunkering and trade on condensate empower the bandits financially and economically. This was why we declared a crackdown on them so that they would not raise the funds to acquire weapons. By so doing, we have helped to cage the criminals masquerading as Niger Delta militants.

However, one area we are having problem is the issue of kidnapping. This is not surprising because all the well known illegal sources of income to the militants or bandits have been plugged by the JTF. So, they just have to look for an alternative source of income, hence they resort to the abduction of innocent people for ransom. And that is our greatest challenge now. We are now mapping out strategies to stop them.

Newswatch: A few months ago, Julius Berger was working on the East-West Road under the security cover provided by the JTF. But in July, they left in fear

over the threat by the militants. Does this not indicate that they are not confident of the protection offered by the JTF?

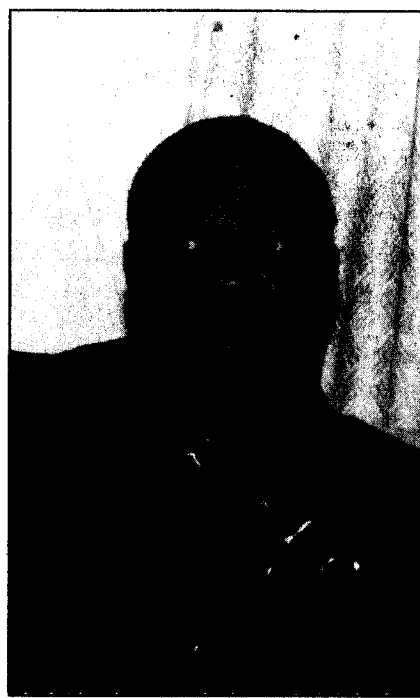
Sagir: I think you should better ask Julius Berger why they pulled out and abandoned the road project.

Newswatch: We understand that their grouse was that two of their workers were kidnapped even when they were being guarded by the JTF.



and to enable the government to execute its programmes of development in the Niger Delta. I am confident that they will call off their declaration of war," Clark said.

But as at press time last week, the militants were yet to observe a ceasefire. Worried by the effect of the clashes between MEND and JTF on the economy as well as the loss of lives in the conflagration, some individuals and groups now think that the use of military force to address militancy in the Niger Delta has failed to achieve the desired results. For instance, the Niger Delta Civil Society Coalition, NDSC, had after its recent meeting in Port Harcourt, said that "the persistent reliance on military security only or ad hoc responses to militia and criminal violence has palpably failed."



Ajuru: Commends JTF

In a statement jointly signed by Anyakwee Nsirimovu and Ledum Mitee, chairman, and vice-chairman respectively of NDSC, the group called on Niger Delta state governments to support a new strategic direction that would create a conducive environment for the civil society and other credible third party engagement initiative.

Similarly, Onegiya Erokosima, chairman of the Niger Delta Non-Violent Movement, said that it is only by spreading the gospel of non-violence to the militants that they would be persuaded to embrace peace. He told *Newsweek* that he has reached out to many of the militant gang leaders, especially Ateke Tom, leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement, NDVM, and they were ready to renounce violence. He, however, appealed to the government to grant amnesty to the militants so that

Sagir: You see, even a few days ago, a lawmaker's father was kidnapped. The mother of a sitting governor had once been kidnapped. Soldiers were killed in the process of enforcing law and order.

So if that was the reason why Julius Berger left, I don't consider it a genuine reason. From the security point of view I think that people should give credit to the JTF. We have provided security to the best of our ability. No country is crime free. What is expected of us as security managers is to reduce the crime rate to a manageable proportion and that is what we are doing.

Newsweek: Despite the huge presence of the JTF in most communities in the Niger Delta, including the creeks, the activities of the militants, especially kidnapping for ransom and the bombing of oil facilities have been on the increase. What are your major handicaps in caging the militants?

Sagir: There is no serious handicap as such. We are in the Armed Forces as war fighters. The issue of kidnapping is best handled by the civil police and probably the State Security Service, SSS. So, if you want to know if there is any handicap pertaining to the issue of kidnapping, it is better you ask the police. Even in the JTF setting where we have the police, army, navy, airforce and the SSS, the issue of kidnapping is handled by the police and probably the SSS. Marine related crises are handled by the Navy. The Air Force provides air cover for the whole operation. The army are the war fighters. So, every segment of the JTF has its responsibilities.

Newsweek: In the present circumstance, would you say the segment of the JTF responsible for checking kidnapping has achieved the desired result?

Sagir: No, we can't say they succeeded because they have not stopped kidnapping completely. But you can't say they have failed because people were kidnapped and through the collective efforts of the security agents, they were released. All we are doing is to ensure that kidnapping does not occur which is not possible because there is no place that is crime free all over the world.

Newsweek: Is the JTF not devising strategies to reduce the activities of the militants to the barest minimum?

Sagir: A good security personnel does not disclose his strategy. War plans need to be safeguarded.

Newsweek: Why is it that the JTF has not been able to apprehend any of the militant kingpins like Ateke Tom, Soboma George and others because they are the ones that are causing the mayhem in the Niger Delta?

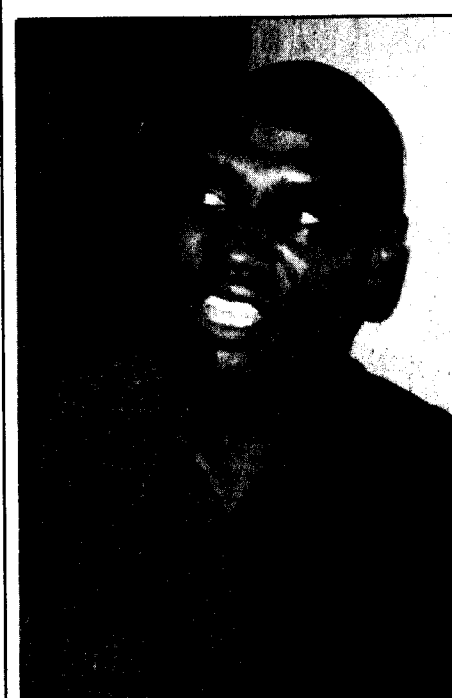
Sagir: It is a simple issue. In the military parlance, once a general is killed, it is believed that thousands of soldiers must have died in the process. In other words, these militant leaders are not always in the forefront when their men are engaging the JTF in any offensive. The leaders will just push their men out and then retreat to the camp. As the JTF men are

firing the militants, the kingpins would be on the run and this makes it difficult for us to get them. Kingpins are always protected by their men. Remember that we had an operation in Okochiri, Okrika, in Rivers State where we narrowly missed Ateke Tom. We also had another operation whereby we narrowly missed Soboma George. We even said that he was killed during the operation but it later turned out that he escaped.

From the security point of view I think that people should give credit to the JTF

they could feel free to leave the creeks and join the larger society to live in peace and harmony. He kicked against the clamour by some people for the withdrawal of the JTF. "If you withdraw the JTF without granting amnesty to the militants, there will be more trouble. But with the presence of the JTF, many militants will be ready to embrace the gospel of non-violence," he said.

Ignatius Hekaire Ajuru, Nigeria's former ambassador to Ukraine, told *Newsweek* that he was not comfortable with the militarisation of the Niger Delta, but the presence of the JTF has helped to bring a semblance of peace and order in Rivers State. "I think their presence is necessary at this time to help restore peace and stability to Rivers State even though I don't think it is necessary to militarise Rivers State," Ajuru said.



Nsiegbe: Criticises corrupt soldiers

Glory Chika Nsiegbe, a.k.a. Anointed Man of God in Grace of Christ Mustard Mission, Port Harcourt told *Newsweek* that it is necessary for the JTF to weed out some of the black legs who are not committed to the task of flushing out the militants. He said that the militants were terrorising the Niger Delta because some corrupt soldiers who are benefiting from the crisis, hob-nob with them. "The JTF should have the political will to flush out the militant kingpins and this will definitely compel MEND to cease hostilities," Nsiegbe said.

For Macaulay Okolugbo, president, Delight Production Limited, the current hostilities by the militants have shown that Nigeria is sitting on a time bomb which could explode if the Niger Delta question is not effectively tackled. ■

What I am telling you is that we want to grab the kingpins and we want people who have information about them to come forward and tell us their whereabouts.

Newsweek: The JTF has been here for about two years now, so one expects you to know where these kingpins are.

Sagir: The location of their camps is well known to the security agencies. We know.

Newsweek: So, what has been the problem hindering you from flushing them out?

Sagir: They are in the creeks. If you know the nature of the creeks, you can't go there with the normal gunboat. In fact, that kind of operation is best suited by air.

Newsweek: Why can't the JTF launch a three-pronged attack by air, sea and land on the hideouts of the kingpins in the creeks?

Sagir: What do you do with the collateral damages that would be involved? We know that they are in the creeks but people are also living there. Some of the people who live there are fishermen. What do you do to ensure that such innocent people are not caught up in the crossfire?

Moreover, we are not in a full scale war. It is a friendly force fighting another friendly force. They are Nigerians, we are constitutionally empowered to protect them and, therefore, cannot turn round to stage a full scale war on the people we are constitutionally empowered to protect. That has been the dilemma of the Niger Delta crisis.

Newsweek: Don't you think they ought to be dealt with ruthlessly since they are constituting a nuisance to the society?

Sagir: Well, we in the JTF feel that there is no one straight jacketed solution to the Niger Delta question. Military solution is not the only way out of the problem. Other factors such as moral, economic, social, and religious options should be there.

Newsweek: How would you react to the allegation that there are bad eggs within the JTF men who alert the militants whenever there is an attempt to flush them out because they work hand-in-hand with them in illegal bunkering from which these saboteurs make a lot of money?

Sagir: I agree with you that there are bad eggs in any institution, be it military or civil. But such an allegation still remains an allegation until it is proven otherwise. Our doors are open for anyone to come forward with concrete evidence that some of our men are involved in leaking information to the militants and such persons will surely be sanctioned in the military way.

We are not saying that we don't have bad eggs. As regards, the issue of bunkering,

we cannot rule out the possibility of some bad eggs being involved. But at the level of leadership of the JTF, we are always preaching against connivance with the bandits to sabotage the nation or engage in any criminal act. If you aid or cover up any criminal act, we have a standing law that will be applied to you. It is well known to the soldiers, you cannot go scot-free.

Newsweek: Are there soldiers that were found wanting who have been sanctioned?

Sagir: Many people were found wanting in one way or the other and they were dealt with militarily. Once the gravity of the offence as established by military law warrants that you should leave the service, such soldiers were dismissed accordingly and sentenced to prison.

Newswatch: How many of such cases have you had since the coming into being of the JTF?

Sagir: Many. We don't need to tell you the number. All I can tell you is that we have had reasons to dismiss soldiers for various offences. Any soldier who goes against the standing rule guiding our operation in the Niger Delta is dealt with militarily.

Newswatch: Recently, we learnt about the discovery of an illegal refinery in Ogoni land by the JTF. How did your men uncover it?

Sagir: We got information on the illegal refinery through a local informant. We then went on patrol, saw it and alerted the relevant authorities about it. Even the state governor was there to see it and he directed the local government chairman to demolish the place and build a modern fish farm.

Newswatch: Did you establish that the militants were behind the illegal refinery?

Sagir: Militants have what they call territorial control for economic space or influence. So, wherever you see such an illegal refinery, the militants would have been involved directly or indirectly. And you can see that the discovery of illegal refining points is a major success for the JTF because it is a serious economic sabotage against the state.

During our patrol on the illegal refining point, we arrested those we met there.

Newswatch: How many of such arrests have you made and what actions have you taken against them?

Sagir: I cannot tell you the number of arrests we have made because this happens on a daily basis. Remember that we have soldiers in Bonny, Soku, Abonnema, Degema, Buguma and Okochiri. So I can't tell you how many arrests we have made but what I can tell you is that we have arrested many people. After the arrest, the JTF has a procedure for handling those arrested. Once an arrest is made, the suspect and the exhibit, if any, will be brought to the JTF headquarters for preliminary investigation which entails the documentations of the suspect. Thereafter, the suspect and the exhibit will be taken to the SSS or police as the case may be. The police or SSS will then do a thorough investigation to decide whether to release the suspect or prosecute him in a law court.

Newswatch: What is the JTF doing to check the activities of sea pirates and militants on the Bonny River which has led to the loss of lives of many innocent people?

Sagir: When we realised that sea piracy was on the increase along the Bonny River, the JTF commander, Brigadier General Sarkin Yaki Bello, in his own wisdom thought of giving out some

gunboats for dedicated gunboat escorts. He directed that all the multinational companies with vessels moving towards Bonny because of its strategic importance to the nation should be escorted so that bandits will no longer disturb them. That was why we came up with the idea of dedicated gunboat escorts. If you hear of any interception by the militants on a moving vessel, you would be sure that it was not escorted by the JTF. And once it is escorted, with the mere citing of our gunboats, the militants will not come. Sea piracy has been drastically reduced.

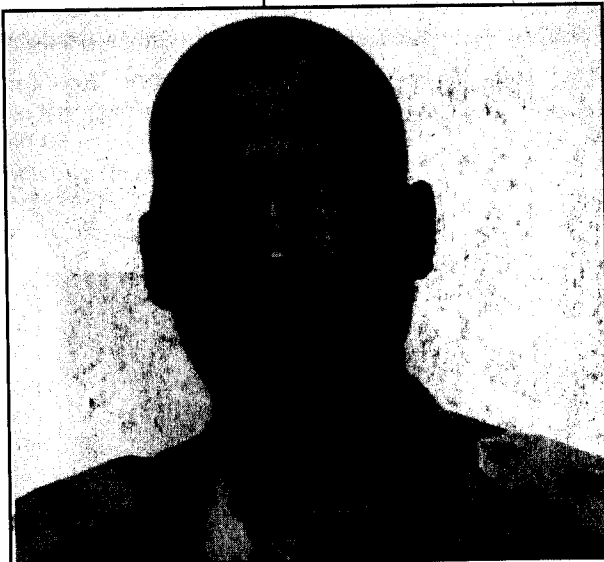
Newswatch: Only recently, a group known as the Niger Delta Civil Society Coalition, NDCSC, claimed that the JTF has failed to live up to expectation and should be withdrawn from the Niger Delta. How would you react to such a score card for the JTF?

Sagir: In a democracy, an individual or group has the right to express an opinion, but it is the larger reasonable members of the society that will determine whether the JTF is succeeding or not. But to the best of my knowledge, all the relevant authorities in the country or in the Niger Delta are satisfied with the efforts being put in place by all the security agencies in the region to ensure that law and order are maintained. So, if any group of people say that the JTF is not succeeding, they have the right to say that. If they call for the disbandment of the JTF, they have the right to do so. But I know that many responsible Nigerians will kick against that.

Newswatch: A few weeks ago, the JTF called for the demolition of the water fronts by the Rivers State government. Why did you raise that issue again knowing fully well that it was greeted with protest when former Governor Celestine Omechia wanted to do that?

Sagir: What we are saying is that almost all the waterfronts like the Abuja waterfront, Marine Base, Nembe waterfront, Abonnema wharfs

and Bundu waterfront sides serve as hide-outs for criminals. When we went to the Abuja waterfront for an operation, we discovered that it provided a cover for the criminals. Whenever the criminals are pursued by the JTF and they run down to the waterfront, they escape easily. Once they enter that place, their waiting boats will always be around to take them back to the creeks. If you are sending security forces to dislodge the militants, their informants living in the waterfronts will alert them and they will take off. And those living in the waterfronts will never tell you where the militants among them live. So, we said that in view of the security implications and the reality on ground, there is need for the relevant authorities to demolish those shanties. It is meant to secure the place and ensure peace in the state. We have realised that most of the bandits live in such areas and they love them because they give them proper protection from the prying eyes of the security agencies. ■



Newswatch, September 29, 2008

The Gaffe on Yar'Adua

False news report that President Umaru Yar'Adua would resign leads to the closure of Channels Television

By Joseph Onyekwere and Augustine Adah



Yar'Adua: In the eye of the storm

THE STORY WAS HOT AND its supposed source is credible. The *Agence Presse*, the French News Agency, another credible international news agency had used it. Channels Television had no reason to doubt the information that President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua planned to resign after re-constituting his cabinet.

So it used the story as a news flash without cross-checking, quoting the News Agency of Nigeria, NAN as the source. That action has now put the station in trouble. Last week, men of the State Security Services, SSS, forced their way into the Lagos and Abuja offices of the station and shut down their operations.

They arrived at the Lagos offices of the television station at about 5pm last Tuesday and ordered the stoppage of transmission. They also arrested Ambrose Okoh, the general manager and Steve Jalo, head of editorial. As at press time last week, the arrested journalists were still in detention.

When *Newswatch* visited the Lagos offices of the station last week, it was still under lock and key. A number of SSS men and regular policemen were still guarding the premises, preventing people from gaining access to the place. But other people whose offices are located within the same building were allowed to freely go about their businesses.

The security men also invaded the Abuja offices of the NAN and interrogated some of its editors. Efforts

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