

Gunmen abduct seven oil workers in Rivers

**Soni Daniel,
Port Harcourt**

NIGERIAN forces on Wednesday began a frantic search for seven expatriate workers of Saipem, oil servicing, taken hostage at dawn by gun-wielding men off the Bonny coast in Rivers State.

Gunmen ambushed the oil production platform belonging to an oil company involved in deep sea drilling and abducted the work-

ers around 1am on Wednesday. There were at least 60 workers on board the production platform at the time the gunmen struck.

A source said the kidnapping followed the inability of the oil firm to pay an earlier ransom demanded by the gunmen.

The victims, mostly expatriates, were reportedly ferried away by their captors in motorised boats into an unknown location in the creeks.

'Why Rivers suspended revenue collectors'

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Port Harcourt**

SPECIAL Adviser to the Rivers State Governor on the Environment and Sanitation, Mr. Ipalibo Harry, said on Wednesday that the state government suspended the operations of revenue consultants and agents for security reasons.

The government last week ordered all revenue agents and consultants to stop the collection of sanitation revenue until further notice and ordered them to return all government documents to the administration within 48 hours.

Harry, who is also the Chairman, Rivers Sanitation Authority, told our correspondent that the government took the decision to save the public from the usual extortion that takes place towards the end of the year.

The SA said that although some of the consultants and agents performed very well in revenue generation for the

state, it was necessary for government to act fast to save the public from extortion as the year was coming to an end.

He said, "You know that some people use all sorts of tactics during the yuletide period to intimidate and extort money from the public in the name of task force on sanitation and so on.

"Government is very conscious of the need to protect the citizenry but we are taking pro-active steps to save them from the hands of people who would want to exploit our revenue drive to smile home."

Harry stated that it was possible for the consultants and agents to be recalled next year but that the state governor, Dr. Peter Odili, must approve such a decision.

The SA disclosed that the state was spending N115m monthly on the evacuation of refuse in the state capital, which is being manned by 31 refuse contractors.

A competent source said that a naval patrol boat had been deployed to search for the men but there was no word on whether they had been sighted as at the time of filing this report.

Police Public Relations Officer for the State, Mrs. Ireju Barasua, confirmed the attack but said the command was yet to know the number of those kidnapped and where they were taken to.

Barasua, a deputy superintendent of police, said that efforts were on to get in touch with other agencies to get details on the incident, which further sent danger signals to oil production firms in the Niger Delta.

No fewer than 60 expatriate workers and Nigerians have so far been kidnapped by militants in the Niger Delta since the beginning of the year, forcing oil companies to scale down production or shut some of their facilities in volatile areas.

However, the abducted workers are usually released unharmed after the payment of huge sums of money prescribed by the hostage takers.

Meanwhile, a source hinted that the abducted foreign oil workers included two persons from Finland, one Briton, one Romanian, one Italian, one Polish and a Filipino.

A naval officer told our correspondent that five of the hostages were freed, one was killed and another seriously injured.

He said all the militants had also been killed as at 6.30pm on Wednesday.

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