

Militants kill five soldiers, kidnap Chinese

Five soldiers attached to the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, were on Friday allegedly killed by youths of Ekuigbo community in Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State who also seized their service rifles.

Also, gunmen believed to be Niger Delta militants on Friday seized five Chinese in Port Harcourt and took them to an unknown location.

Following the Ughelli incident, armoured tanks and many lorry loads of armed personnel were deployed in the town on Friday afternoon, on the orders of the JTF Commander, Brig-Gen. Alfred Ilogho. The development heightened tension in the area, with scores of residents fleeing to safe havens.

Findings by our correspondent revealed that the latest crisis in Ughelli was rooted in last Saturday's killing of three Ekuigbo youths by their Oteri counterparts, allegedly on the prompting of a member of Delta State House of Assembly (name withheld). The deceased, who had stormed the residence of the lawmaker to collect entitlements for a recent assignment he gave to them, were confronted by Oteri youths.

However, Ekuigbo youths, allegedly mobilised by the lawmaker, were said to have

Sola Adebayo, Warri and Soni Daniel, Port Harcourt

been angry that the Delta State Police Command accepted responsibility for the death of their kinsmen by describing them as bandits shot by policemen.

Apparently touched by the fate of their kinsmen, Ekuigbo youths reportedly went after all uniformed men, beginning with Tuesday's kidnap of a soldier of the JTF, who was passing through the area. This action set the stage for a showdown as a contingent of soldiers from JTF later stormed the scene to rescue their colleague.

One person was killed and a building razed by the rampaging soldiers. However, the situation assumed a worrisome dimension on Friday when five soldiers were allegedly accosted by Ekuigbo youths along Ughelli/Patani Highway in Ughelli and thereafter killed at a location in the area.

The action infuriated Ilogho who instantly deployed stern-looking personnel in military trucks and equipment to fish out the youths. The heavy presence of the soldiers elicited fears in the area and Ilogho, who confirmed the report, however, declared the soldiers missing.

In Port Harcourt, the five Chinese, said to be contract workers of a new telecommunications company based in Abuja, were kidnapped by the militants around 5am on Friday at Rumuokunde community in Emuohua local Government Area of rivers State.

The men are said to have been on the site for about three weeks and were exploring the possibility of starting work on the new project when the gunmen seized them.

Rivers State Police Commissioner, Mr. Felix Ogbaudu, confirmed the development in a statement in Port Harcourt. Ogbaudu, who spoke through the command's Public Relations Officer, Mrs. Ireju Barasua, said the police were making frantic efforts to establish contact with the kidnappers and rescue the workers.

Reacting to the latest kidnap, the the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, said the Federal Government was doing everything possible to secure the release of all foreign nationals being held hostage in the Niger Delta.

Agency report said the official, who also confirmed receiving formal complaint by the Chinese ambassador, Mr Xu Jianguo, on the incident.