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Soldiers, militants clash again at Agip flow station

By Bisi Olaniyi and Sola Adebayo

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Soldiers of the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta and militants, on Wednesday night, engaged each other in another round of gunfight at the Ogboinbiri flow Station of the Nigerian Agip Oil Company in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

There were, however, conflicting claims by the two parties on the number of casualties.

While the Commander of the JTF in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, Brig.-Gen. Lawrence Ngubane, and Spokesman for the Force, Maj. Omale Ochagwuba, said 12 militants were killed, an Ijaw youth leader claimed that 18 soldiers lost their lives.

Ngubane and Ochagwuba, who declined to give the casualty figure recorded by the JTF, added that the militants had been dislodged from the seized flow station.

They, however, gave conflicting figures on the number of Agip workers that were freed in separate telephone interviews with our correspondents.

The JTF boss put the figure at nine while the spokesman said they were 11.

When Ngubane was asked if he was aware that some of his men died in the gunfight, he said, "Twelve militants died in the operation while nine oil workers and a soldier were rescued. The corpses of the militants littered the scene.

"The casualty figure on the side of the JTF is not ready yet. You know the soldiers, who are aware of the operation might have found an escape route.

"Some of them will come out later and that is why we cannot jump to conclusions that we lost a particular number of soldiers for now."

He explained that the recalcitrant posture of the militants to vacate the facility necessitated the military operation.

The Coordinator of the Bayelsa State-owned security outfit, the Bayelsa Volunteers, Chief Joshua Benamesia, who also confirmed the latest development, said, "As I am speaking with you (2.42 pm), there is a serious fight between the JTF men and youths at the Ogboinbiri flow station.

"It is extremely difficult to confirm the figure of those who have lost their lives in the last few hours at the facility, but the two sides recorded heavy casualties."

He advised that 'wisdom' should be applied in handling the militants.

He added, "We are working very hard to ensure a quick resolution of the impasse, to pave the way for peace and development in the state and the Niger Delta."

Benamesia said that efforts made by the BV and other stakeholders to prevail on the youths to vacate the flow station failed.

The JTF men had, on June 12, 2007 killed nine youths, who were travelling in a speedboat from Ogbotobo in Delta State to a riverside community in the Southern Ijaw Local Government Area of Bayelsa State.

Last Sunday, the militants mobilised from different parts of the Niger Delta and attacked soldiers on guard at the Agip flow station.

The militants claimed that they killed 12 soldiers but the Nigerian Navy only said the

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whereabouts of some of the soldiers were unknown.

THE PUNCH had exclusively reported on Wednesday that the Federal Government issued a 48-hour ultimatum to Bayelsa State Government to ascertain the whereabouts of the 12 soldiers and nine oil workers declared missing after the encounter with the militants.

The government threatened a military operation in the area at the expiration of the ultimatum.

The deadline expired on Wednesday night.

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