

Violence: FG reads Riot Act to militants

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THE Federal Government on Sunday read the Riot Act to Niger Delta militants, saying it would no longer condone violence in the region.

The warning came as more soldiers were deployed in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, where militants killed 15 people and destroyed a mega-filling station belonging to the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation on Saturday.

The Minister of Information and Communication, Mr. John Odey, who spoke exclusively with one of our correspondents in Abuja, said that the government was 'fully' ready to bring the militants to book and restore normalcy in the region.

Describing Saturday's incident as 'unfortunate,' Odey said Nigeria was not a lawless country and that the government would not fold its arms and allow 'some elements' to plunge the nation into anarchy.

He said the Nigeria Police Force and the military had been exercising caution in confronting the militants, with a belief that they (militants) would lay down their arms.

The minister said the government was working out a 'holistic approach' to solving the Niger Delta crises and warned the militants not to provoke the Police and the military.

He said, "I am aware that the President (Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua) has directed the Police to maintain law and order in the region. And as you can see, stability has already returned to the area.

"The Port Harcourt incident is unfortunate and government will not tolerate that kind of activities.

"Our country is not a lawless society and this government is one that is alive to its responsibility to the people.

"The militants should realise that this government is not prepared to tolerate their activities. They should not

test the will of government.

"They should hearken to calls to lay down their arms and allow peace to reign.

"They should realise that the Police and the military have been careful not to use force to restore stability to the region.

"These agencies are adequately equipped to check any insurgency but they have been exercising restraint in their activities in the area.

"The militants should not push them to the wall."

He urged residents of the Niger Delta to go about their normal duties, saying that government was doing everything to halt the 'criminal activities' in the region.

"No activity of any individual or group can go beyond the control of government. The Niger Delta crises cannot get out of hand. Government is equal to the task," Odey said.

On whether the government would declare a state of emergency on Rivers State or not, the minister said, "I have just told you that everything is under control.

"The matter is being handled at the security level. What we are interested in is for lasting peace to return to the region.

"We will soon achieve that with the holistic approach we have adopted in solving the problem."

More soldiers were, however, deployed in major streets of Port-Harcourt, to maintain peace and order.

One of our correspondents, who went round some parts of the city, reported that the soldiers mounted road blocks at major junctions and searched vehicles.

Armoured Personnel Carriers were also seen in some areas, including the entrance to Government House, the state Police Command Headquarters and the Mile 1 Police Station. Some APCs were seen patrolling some highways in the city.

Flashpoints like the old Port-Harcourt town, Diobu, Mile 1 and Abonima Wharf were patrolled by soldiers and policemen.

The Mile 1 and Mile 3 markets, which open for business everyday, were deserted.

Although shootings were heard around the Abonima Wharf, no incident of violence was reported on Sunday.

In its reaction to calls for a state of emergency, the Rivers State Government said such was not necessary.

The state Commissioner for Information, Mr. Emmah Okah, told our correspondents in Port Harcourt that everything was being done to bring the situation under control.

Okah, who spoke shortly after a programme by *Rhythm FM*, said that it was not true that the state government was helpless in the face of the attacks.

He said, "Those who

are calling for a state of emergency do not understand that if soldiers take over the entire state, a generation of our youths may be wiped out.

"We appeal to parents to call their children to order while also appealing to the gunmen to drop their arms and embrace government's rehabilitation programme to better their lives."

Okah's reaction came after callers to a programme on *Rhythm FM*, 'Viewpoint,' asked for a state of emergency in the state.

A presenter of the programme, Mr. Segun Awolabi, was later invited for questioning by the State Security Service.

Awolabi was, however, allowed to go after meeting with the leadership of the SSS.

On Saturday, angry youths of Oben in

Orhionmwon Local Government Area of Edo State over a gas plant operated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company.

The youths, who were said to be demanding better representation in the state's Oil and Gas Commission, were, however, dislodged by the operatives of the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta.

They allegedly inflicted injuries on three workers of the SPDC.

The youths had twice in the last one month occupied the facility to push for their demand.

Reports had it that the JTF operatives were called in by the SPDC after the invasion.

The operatives were said to have succeeded in arresting 10 of the youths, including their President, Mr. West Ogienwanyi, and the

Chairman of the Oil and Gas Host Communities Association, Dr. Sam Igbinewaka.

A spokesman for Shell, Mr. Precious Okolobo, confirmed the incident to one of our correspondents on Sunday.

"The gas plant was shut down briefly and has now been reopened," Okolobo said.

The state government, in its reaction, explained that having appointed an Oben citizen to the board of the commission and somebody from the local government area as chairman, the community's interest had been properly catered for.

The Chief of Staff to the Edo State Government, Mr. Isaiah Osifo, said what was important was the quality of representation and the benefits the community would derive from the commission and not who held the office.

Poll: Atiku accuses INEC of frustrating petition

Tobi Somiyi, Abuja

FORMER Vice-President Atiku Abubakar has accused the Independent National Electoral Commission and its Chairman, Prof. Maurice Iwu, of 'deliberately' disobeying an order by the Presidential Election Tribunal to release the certified true copy of the April 21 election results to him.

Abubakar, in an application he filed on Thursday, therefore, asked the tribunal to bar INEC, Iwu and 806 electoral officers from defending the allegations of malpractices he raised against them in his petition.

The application, which was obtained exclusively on Friday by our correspondent, asked the court to enter judgment against INEC and its officials for also failing to file their reply to his petition within the time allowed by the law governing election petitions.

The tribunal had on May 15 directed INEC to furnish Abubakar with the CTC of the results and other documents. On July 19, it also ordered the commission and its officials to file their reply

to the ex-VP's petition within 14 days.

In the application, Abubakar said that INEC and its officials ought to have filed the reply on August 2 if they had complied with the tribunal's directive.

A lawyer in the chambers of Rickey Tarfa and Co, Mr. Segun Olowookere, said that a search he conducted at the tribunal's registry showed that INEC and the officials had not filed the reply.

In an affidavit deposed to, Olowookere said, "That I made repeated visits to the registry of this court to collect the said reply and I was informed by the Deputy Chief Registrar that the respondents (INEC and its officials) were yet to file their reply.

"That as at date, respondents have enjoyed over 77 days after the service of petition on them and they are yet to show any interest in defending the petition."

The counsel filed a brief of argument in support of the application to enter judgment against INEC and its officials.

The brief reads, "We submit that the prayers contained in the applicants' application is

for entering of judgment against the respondents for disobeying a pre-hearing order and for failing to file their reply within the time provided in the First Schedule of the Electoral Act.

"It is trite that the respondents against whom the order is sought were represented at the pre-hearing session by Kanu Agabi (SAN), and other lawyers and it is on record that the said set of respondents were directed by an order of this tribunal to file their reply to the petition within 14 days from the date of the pre-hearing session being July 19, 2007.

"The said set of respondents against whom judgment is sought have, till date, refused, neglected and or omitted to file any reply to the petition.

"The said period extended by the court expired on the 2nd of August, 2007."

Abubakar stated that INEC and Iwu had no respect for the tribunal.

He said, "The totality of their action and or conduct simply shows that they have no respect or regard for this court.

"This has been their attitude before, during and

after the election of 2007."

Abubakar had in the petition asked the tribunal to nullify the election of Alhaji Umaru Yar'Adua as president on the grounds that the poll was marred by irregularities.

Hearing in the petition resumes on Monday (today).

The former Vice-President is being represented by 11 Senior Advocates of Nigeria - Prof. Ben Nwabueze, Prof. Babatunde Kasumu, Alhaji Abdullahi Ibrahim, Prof. Itse Sagay, Mr. Kola Awodein, Tarfa, Chief Adeniyi Akintola, Chief Emeka Ngige, Adetunji Oyejipo, Chief Titus Ashaolu and Kemi Pihairo.

The petitions by the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Grand Alliance, Dim

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu and his Green Party counterpart, Mr. Arthur Nwankwo, will also be mentioned before the tribunal on Monday.

That of the All Nigeria Peoples Party presidential candidate, Maj.-Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, is also fixed for Monday for report of service on the defendants.