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## Uncertainty over killing of MEND leader

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Anxiety reigned in the Niger Delta region on Tuesday over the rumoured killing of the leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, Mr. Henry Okah.

A report by Reuters last night said that Okah was shot dead in detention in Kaduna.

The report claimed that a statement by one Jomo Gbomo, a MEND leader, confirmed the alleged killing of the Niger Delta militant leader.

Also, Okah's brother, Charles, in a telephone interview with one of our correspondents, said that he learnt that the activist had been killed.

He added that a source informed him that Okah might have been killed through an 'accidental discharge' while being interrogated.

But the Federal Government on Tuesday night denied claims of Okah's death.

Presidential spokesman, Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, told BBC that Okah was in Abuja, adding, "I know that Henry Okah is alive. He is in safe custody."

Also, the Assistant Director, Public Relations, 1 Division of the Nigerian Army, Col. Ganiyu Akinola, denied the killing. He said that he was not aware that Okah was brought to Kaduna.

He added that the alleged killing was a rumour.

The statement from Jomo Gbomo, however, reads, "Disturbing reports just reaching us suggest that Henry Okah succumbed to injuries from gunshot wounds at about 0400 hours today (Tuesday) at a military hospital in Kaduna State, after he was shot in what those interrogating him claim was an 'accidental discharge.'"

"The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta is giving the Federal Government the next 24 hours to confirm or deny this murder rumour," the group said, threatening violence in the Niger Delta.

Okah had led a wave of attacks on the oil industry before he was arrested in Angola on gun-running charges last September. MEND claimed he was extradited to Nigeria last Thursday.

If confirmed, news of his death is likely to spark a new round of violence in the Niger Delta.

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In a telephone interview with one of our correspondents on Tuesday evening, Okah's wife, Azuka, said she had not heard of her husband's alleged death. She, however, said she was worried about his silence since he was extradited.

"I have not heard a word from him since he was extradited to Nigeria. The last time he called me was when he was still in Angola. He called to inform me that some lawyers were helping to perfect his defence.

"But the Angolan News reported last Saturday of his extradition and dicey condition in Nigeria."

Okah, long rumoured to be behind MEND and its activities, was extradited on February 14, 2008 to Nigeria.

Controversy has continued to trail his extradition as his family claimed that the act did not follow due process.

The family also alleged that Okah did not commit any offence, insisting that there must be a court pronouncement before he could be extradited to Nigeria.

However, the President of the West African Bar Association and one of the lawyers to MEND, Mr. Femi Falana, has faulted the extradition.

He said that the action was illegal, stressing that Okah's extradition was at the instance of the Federal Government.

However, two legal practitioners, Mr. Tayo Oyetibo, (SAN), and Mr. Wale Ogunade, disagreed with Falana on the issue, saying that extradition depends on the Angolan laws.

The lawyers spoke in separate interviews with our correspondent in Lagos on Tuesday.

Oyetibo said, "Extradition depends on Angolan laws because it is a local law. If any legal action is being contemplated on the matter, that will be against the deporting authorities (the Angolan Government), not Nigeria.

But Falana said, "The extradition of Okah is illegal and does not follow due process. He has been resident in South Africa since 2004. And he travelled to Angola in August 2007 when he was arrested at the instance of the Federal Government on the allegation of gun running.

"The Angolan Government had investigated him and found nothing incriminating against him.

"Having not committed any offence in Angola, he can't be brought back in the way he was extradited to Nigeria.

"Since his forced entry to Nigeria, the Federal Government has denied access to him while his family till date cannot locate his whereabouts.

"What the family is asking is for the Federal Government to release him or charge him to court."

Falana also hinted that the family would be filing a legal action against government at the Abuja High Court on Thursday.

But Ogunade said, "I believe that the bilateral agreement between Nigeria and Angola must have been responsible for the extradition."

MEND launched its campaign of kidnapping expatriate workers and sabotaging oil installations two years ago, cutting Nigerian output by nearly one quarter. The group is fighting for the emancipation of the Niger Delta region and its people.

The Federal Government has promised to hold talks with the militants to find a permanent solution to the long-running conflict, but little progress has been made.

Okah was arrested on gun-running charges at Luanda airport on September 3, 2007 as he was leaving Angola for South Africa.

MEND had claimed that after his arrest, Okah was beaten, shackled in the ankle, cuff-chained and blind-folded with a hood before being flown out of Angola under the cover of night to an undisclosed location.

MEND also claimed that Okah had gone to Angola on a business trip to inspect a ship he was to purchase.

Meanwhile, the monthly revenues allocated to the Federal Government and the 36 states of the federation dropped by nine per cent – from N317bn to NN290bn.

But 'excess crude account' rose from \$10bn to \$13.9bn in January.

"The total funds declared and recommended for distribution for the month of January is N289.597bn, as against N317.350bn for the month of December, thus showing a decrease of N27.753bn or 8.745 per cent," the Federation Accounts Allocation Committee said in a statement in Abuja on Tuesday.

The Accountant-General of the Federation, Mr. Ibrahim Dankwambo, who spoke with journalists in Abuja said revenues shared were a function of quantity of oil produced and price sold.

"Unfortunately, the quantity varies. There was a drop in quantity as a result of what is happening in the Niger Delta. The volume of production went down and this affected earnings," he said.

Dankwambo, however, did not give any figure.

Violence in the oil-rich region has led to many deaths.

Crude output as at the end of December 2007 stood at 2.21million barrels per day, according to the Central Bank of Nigeria on February 3.

Dankwambo said due to the delay in 2008 budget that proposed an oil benchmark of \$59 per barrel, the government had to use the 2007 oil benchmark of \$40 per barrel for derivation in January.

Meanwhile, the Minister of State for Finance, Mr. Remi Babalola, said the implementation of the new indices for revenue allocation was under way.

Besides informing President Umaru Yar'Adua on the progress made so far towards the implementation, Babalola said a committee, comprising representatives of the Ministry of Finance, the Accountant-General of the

Federation, the National Planning Commission and the Revenue Mobilisation Allocation and Fiscal Commission had been set up to ensure equity, fairness and due process before implementation.

On the reconciliation of payments made on the Paris Club Debt exit, he said instances of underpayments to some oil producing states regarding payments made on the Paris Club Debt exit in 2005 had been identified.

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