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Tuesday, September 16, 2008

100 People feared killed as oil war enters

By Ibanga Isine, Femi Makinde and Clara Nwachukwu with agency report

Operation Hurricane Barbarossa, an oil war declared by the Movement for the Eman second day on Monday with the death toll put at 100 by Reuters.

Reuters, which attributed the figure to two security sources, also reported that Armoured Personnel Carriers and more troops had been deployed in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Reuters, a global news agency with a strong presence in Nigeria however, did not give a breakdown of the figure. MEND and the military authorities have since the "war" began on Sunday claimed inflicting heavy casualties on one another.

The Associated Press, which described the oil war as the heaviest between MEND and troops of the Joint Task Force, otherwise known as operation Restore Peace in the Niger Delta, so far, quoted its correspondent as saying that Port Harcourt was "on edge."

The AP correspondent said, "I drove into Port Harcourt from the neighbouring state of Imo. It's a distance of about an hour and 30 minutes by road and I counted no less than 20 checkpoints manned by heavily-armed police and troops.

"Within the city of Port Harcourt itself, there are sandbags protecting government installations. There are troops on pick-up trucks with machine guns.

There are APCs deployed at strategic parts of the city. People are moving around, but there's some kind of tense situation. It's a city on edge."

MEND on Monday attacked the Alakiri Flow Station, a major oil platform operated by the Shell Petroleum Development Company.

A community guard was killed and four others injured in the incident. The attack forced the SPDC to withdraw more of its workers from the Niger Delta.

MEND had, in an e-mail to THE PUNCH, said it burnt down the flow station around 12.15am on Monday.

It also claimed in the statement by its Spokesman, Mr. Jomo Gbomo, that scores of oil workers and soldiers, who violated its order to vacate facility, perished inside it (facility).

The statement reads in part, "Heavily armed fighters from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta stormed the facility and have razed it to the ground as promised.

"Resistance was non-existent as the soldiers fled their dug-in positions leaving behind their colleagues and the workers inside the facility to their fate. The foolhardy workers and soldiers who did not heed our warning perished inside the station. The facility was still burning when we left."

MEND also warned that any oil vessel that violated its advice not to sail into the Niger Delta would be blown up.



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The Director of Public Relations, Defence Headquarters Brig.-Gen. Emeka Onwamaegbu, dismissed MEND's claim that it killed some soldiers.

He said, "There is absolutely no truth in the claim by MEND. MEND is employing propaganda to achieve its aims.

"There is an encounter quite alright between our men and MEND. We have just two of our men that were injured. I hope the MEND or whoever is behind all these will embrace dialogue. We have no reason not to disclose casualties if we have any."

The JTF Spokesman, Lt. Col. Sagir Musa, who spoke with one of our correspondents said the militants in 10 speedboats attacked a military post located at the facility.

He claimed that during the gun duel that lasted for about an hour, some of the militants probably died while detonating dynamites.

Musa said, "It is greatly feared that the flow station might have caught fire due to crossfire during the encounter.

"No casualty was recorded on the side of our forces and the situation is being closely monitored and is under control. The battle lasted for one hour, with the militants using dynamite and bombs, but the attack was repelled."

Musa wondered how soldiers would be killed without their corpses being found anywhere.

He said, "The claim that soldiers were killed is just a wild propaganda. The so-called militants should know that the time is up. They are advised to come to terms with reality as the status quo will be reversed for the good of all."

The Public Affairs Adviser of the SPDC, Mr. Tony Okonedo, confirmed the killing of the guard and the wounding of four others during the attack.

Okonedo said, "We confirm that our Alakiri flow station was attacked by unknown gunmen, and regrettably, a community guard was killed in the incident. Four other people also sustained injury during the attack and are being treated in our facility in Port Harcourt.

"As a precautionary measure, we have down-manned facilities in some of the field locations. That is, we have reduced the number of men in such facilities.

"The SPDC is aware of the difficulty the security situation places on staff and continues to monitor developments."

He, however, refused to say how much production was shut down as a result of the attack.

Okonedo, who denied that the facility was torched, said, "We cannot talk about production shut down because we do not give out our production figures. But I can tell you that the flow station was not raised."

Also on Monday, MEND claimed in another e-mail statement that it had killed more than 17 soldiers since its reprisal attack on the JTF began on Saturday.

Another of its spokespersons, Cynthia Whyte, said most of the soldiers were shot dead while engaging in illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta.

The statement reads in part, "On behalf of the larger coalition of the heroic combatants of the MEND, we wish to declare the ongoing success of operation Hurricane Barbarossa which began an hour after midnight of September 14, 2008, leaving in its trail about 17 to 24 dead soldiers of Northern Nigeria stock, many of whom are engaged in illegal oil bunkering across the creeks of the Niger Delta.

"This operation will continue and will remain undeterred. Our strategic objective will be to question the supposed might of the armed forces of the Nigerian state especially bandit units of the JTF who believe that they occupy our lands, rape our women, attack fishermen and render our lands desolate. They will fail."

MEND also said that it would not surrender to the "violent approach" by the Rivers State Governor, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi, and vowed to bring him to his knees through serial attacks on strategic locations.

It said, "We wish to remind the Supreme Court-appointed Governor of Rivers State, Mr. Amaechi, that this will not be over in a while. He chose the path of force and violence and that is what he will get.

"To the bandit soldiers of the Nigerian state, we will meet in the creeks. Welcome to the new edition of The Rumble in the Creeks."

Fighting started on Saturday in Elom Tombia, Rivers State, when the suspected hideout of a militant leader, Mr. Farah Dagogo, was pounded by troops during an aerial and maritime onslaught.

In a reprisal action, MEND attacked the Soku Gas Plant and Chevron facility at Kula, where it said many soldiers sent as reinforcement were ambushed, killed and dispossessed of their weapons.

It also claimed that its men blew up several points on a major crude trunk pipeline at Nembe Creek.

The JTF has since denied the claim.

Meanwhile, the Association of Licensed Customs Agents of Nigeria on Monday said that activities of militants in the Niger Delta had slowed down the work of its members.

The Zonal Eastern Ports Chairman of the association, Mr Emenike Nwokeoji, told the News Agency of Nigeria in Port Harcourt, that people were scared to go and bring many cargo vessels on the sea into the wharf.

Nwokeoji said that the militants obstructed the activities of his members in several ways, adding that it was expensive to provide security for the vessels.



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