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Defence chief in Rivers as JTF, militants continue clashes

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THE 'oil war' declared by a militant group in the Niger Delta continued on Wednesday when the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta blew up more oil pipelines.



Photo file

Chief of Defence Staff, Air Marshall
Paul Dike

The fresh attacks came amid a surprise visit by the newly appointed Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Paul Dike, to military formations in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital.

Our correspondent reported that Dike was received at the Port Harcourt Air Force Base by the Commander of the Second Brigade, Nigerian Army, Brig-Gen. Sarkin Yarkin-Bello and other heads of the military formations.

It was learnt that the CDS shortly after arriving at the state, went into closed door meeting with senior military officers in the region.

Attempts to speak with the military spokesman in the state, Lt. Col. Sagir Musa, failed as calls to his telephone would not get through.

Among the facilities destroyed by the gunmen included Orubiri flow station and a major oil pipeline at Rumuekpe, all in Rivers State.

While Shell Petroleum Development Company operates the flow station, the trunk pipeline is jointly owned by the SPDC and Chevron Nigeria Limited.

A security source said that an unspecified number of militants onboard eight speedboats invaded Orubiri flow station.

He said the rampaging gunmen also attacked the naval houseboat located near the flow station which is operated under joint venture between the SPDC and the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation.

The source added that 10 naval ratings, who were on guard duty on the facility when it came under the attack, in a spirited attempt to ward off the militants, returned fire.

Sensing the stiff resistance by the naval men, the militants detonated bombs and dynamite and both the flow station and the houseboat exploded.

A spokesman for the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement/ Niger Delta Patriotic Front, Tamunokuro Ebitari, which claimed responsibility for the attack, insisted that many soldiers, who guarded the facility died.

Another source told our correspondent that rival cult groups which fought each other in the past, had regrouped to launch fierce attacks aimed at crippling crude oil exports.

For instance, he said that the Niger Delta Vigilante Movement and the Niger Delta Patriotic Force under the leadership of Ateke Tom, carried out the attack on Orubiri flow station.

Although MEND also claimed responsibility for the Orubiri attack, Ebitari in a telephone

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interview said, "The attack is a continuation of our operation zero exploration.

"We are warning every company to quit the region as this is an all out war against those, who have sworn to destroy the Ijaw race. Nobody will be spared. After the creeks, we are coming up to town.

"No more deceit. Give us peace and justice or death. As free born, we cannot be slaves in our own land."

However, in an e-mail by Jomo Gbomo, MEND said its fighters and those from the Niger Delta Volunteer Force attacked and destroyed Orubiri flow station.

He claimed that all the soldiers on guard were killed, their weapons seized and the houseboat razed.

Part of the mail reads, "Every group in the region have dropped their differences and come together to fight a common enemy who has used the instrument of state and the tactics of divide and rule to oppress the region for five decades.

"Soldiers and oil workers are advised to abandon all oil facilities including the off shore rigs of Bonga and Agbami as we want to minimise casualties before Hurricane Barbarossa arrives.

"Those who choose unwisely to remain will face the consequences of their decisions and should learn from their colleagues in the United States who evacuated ahead of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. A word is enough for the wise."

Gbomo said if the JTF still insisted that none of its troops was killed, it should take journalists and photographers to assess by themselves the aftermath of Hurricane Barbarossa on Orubiri.

Henceforth, he said MEND would start to document its raids by providing digital cameras and camcoders for each fighting unit.

"After Rivers State, the hurricane will be heading to the neighboring states in the Niger Delta," he said.

But a major feat was on Wednesday recorded in the war against criminality in the Niger Delta as a militant group stormed a rival camp in the creeks of Delta State and recovered 17 assorted arms and an unspecified number of ammunition stolen from a police formation in Ondo State.

Our correspondent gathered that 40 militias were overpowered and arrested from the camp by the victorious group at the end of the bloody clash between the warriors of the two outlawed factions.

It was gathered that the leader of the camp located in the creeks of Egbema Kingdom in Warri North Local Government Area of Delta State, identified as Henry Stanley who operated Egbema 1, was also apprehended.

The suspects and the weapons were moved to camp five operated by a popular Ijaw activist in a riverside community in Warri South West Local Government Area.

Stanley had been on the wanted list of the security agencies in the Niger Delta, especially the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, over alleged involvement in criminal activities along the waterways and the oil industry in the region.

The leader of the triumphant camp, popularly known in the region as "Shoot-on-Sight", said the arms and ammunition would be handed over to security agents.

The warlord told our correspondent on the phone after the operation on Wednesday that his group was against criminality, adding that the action of Stanley was antithetical to the genuine struggle of the people of the Niger Delta. He said in pidgin English that Egbema 1 was one of the few disgruntled elements behind the growing criminality and ending crises in the region, adding that their action had cast aspersion on the genuine agitation for a better living condition by the people of the region.

Our correspondent gathered that Egbema 1 had allegedly led his followers to Irele Divisional Police Station in Ondo State in August, where they disarmed the policemen on

duty and looted the armoury.

Shoot-on-Sight said the Commissioner of Police and the Director of State Security Service in Ondo State have been contacted over the development, adding that they have been asked to initiate moves to evacuate the weapons and the suspects.

Finding by our correspondent, however, showed that the action was initiated by a Niger Delta activist, Chief Government Ekpomukpolo, who was said to be unhappy with the unending resort to criminality by Egbema 1.

Consequently, it was gathered that he detailed Shoot-on-Sight, to be his "chief operating officer" to lead onslaught against Stanley in the early hours of Wednesday. It was further learnt that he asked his lieutenants to dislodge his rival and empty his armoury.

However, a reliable source closed to camp five told our correspondent that Stanley resisted the action, adding that he was subdued after three hours of gun duel in which a yet-to-be-ascertained number of militias sustained injuries on either side.

Shoot-on-Sight in the interview with our correspondent dedicated the victory to Ekpomupolo, adding that the Ijaw youth leader has asked all youths to embrace peace and employ civilised means to ventilate their grievances.

When contacted, the Coordinator of the Joint Media Campaign Centre of the JTF in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, Lt.Col. Rabe Abubakar, said the incident had not been reported to the authorities of the security outfit.

But the Secretary of the Federal Government Committee on Peace and Conflict Resolution in the Niger Delta, Mr. Kingsley Kuku, confirmed the incident and commended Shoot-at-Sight for the feat. Kuku said arrangements were being made to transfer the suspects and the weapons recovered from them to Ondo State Police Command in Akure.

"Our people should not resort to things that are strange to our struggle. These people are the criminals in our struggle and their excesses could not be tolerated any longer. I thanked and congratulated Shoot-on-Sight and I called for peace in Edo, Ondo and Delta axis," he added.

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