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Militants kill five naval officers, injure others in Bayelsa

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Published: Tuesday, 14 Apr 2009

Five naval officers were feared killed while others were alleged to have been abducted as armed militants in speedboats attacked a facility of the Shell Petroleum Development Company in Nembe Local Government Area of Bayelsa State on Monday.

Sources from the creeks told one of our correspondents that several others were also injured in the attack which took place during a heavy rain.

A source said that the militants took the operatives of the Joint Task Force unawares.

Another source, however, told one of our correspondents that three naval ratings attached to the JTF were killed, while four speedboats used by the militants were sunk in the gun duel.

He added that a military helicopter had evacuated the casualties and the wounded at dawn.

Tension has, however, mounted in the volatile Nembe area of the state, spoiling the people's Easter celebrations.

Several indigenes who had travelled to the area for the Easter were stranded as the build-up of arms between the militants and the JTF mounted.

The JTF has, however, responded, saying the militants will pay dearly for the attack.

The Coordinator of the JTF Joint Media Campaign Centre, Lt.Col. Rabe Abubakar, said it was bad Easter for the militants.

Confirming the attack, Abubakar said it was in retaliation for the sinking of four militants' speedboats in a previous encounter on Sunday.

The JTF spokesman said, "Militants numbering 20 who were conveyed in six speedboats caught in the crossfire with the JTF troops on April 12, 2009 at Okilo Creek, near Igbomatoru River, Tebideba Route, Bayelsa State."

He said the encounter led to the sinking of four of the armed militants' speedboats with all the occupants, while two of them managed to escape with gunshot wounds.

Abubakar said only one soldier was injured in the encounter.

He stressed that the attack was masterminded by a militant leader, known as Ogunbos.

Abubakar added, "The same militant leader, Ogunbos, was responsible for attacks and destruction of houseboats belonging to Daewoo Nigeria Limited stationed at Igbomatoru area of Southern Ijaw, working for an Italian oil giant, AGIP Nigeria Limited recently.

He said "This and other heinous crimes committed by this militant leader and his

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He said, "This and other heinous crimes committed by this militant leader and his unpatriotic men made the JTF to trail him and apprehend him for the criminality he has committed to serve as a deterrent to others."

Abubakar confirmed that there had been another unprovoked attack on the JTF troops at Nembe Shell location in Bayelsa State on Monday at about 1.45am.

The JTF spokesman identified the brains behind the attack as Kitikata and Fara Dagogo.

According to him, one naval rating was killed while two sustained minor injuries.

"In the process of defending the facility, one naval rating was killed, two sustained minor injuries and four Shell speedboats were taken away by the miscreants," Abubakar said.

The attack had demonstrated the fragility of the amnesty offered to militants in the Niger Delta by the Federal Government.

But a militant group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, on Monday dissociated itself from the attack.

The group, however, said in a statement by its spokesman, Jomo Gbomo, that it was not too late for the Federal Government to begin a genuine peace process to avoid a civil war that could start from the Niger Delta.

MEND added that it would assist the JTF to rescue the naval ratings that were captured as prisoners of war.

Meanwhile, indications have emerged that the Rivers State Police Command has deployed gunboats in some of the flashpoints in the state in its effort to check piracy and militancy in the area.

Hitherto, waterways in the state were mainly patrolled by naval operatives from the NNS Pathfinder, with gunboats that could withstand the firepower from sophisticated arms used by militants and pirates.

But two weeks ago, the Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Mike Okiro, officially inaugurated six new gunboats and handed them over to the state police command.

Investigations by our correspondents, however, revealed that the Commissioner in charge of the command, Mr. Bala Hassan, had deployed the gunboats to escape routes used by kidnappers and militants.

A source said the boats had been sent to Bonny Waterfront, Opobo Waterfront, Iwofe Waterfront, Port Harcourt Waterfront and Rumuolumini, while one was on stand-by for emergency duties.

When contacted on the telephone, the Police Public Relations Officer in the state, Mrs. Rita Inoma-Abbey, confirmed the deployment of the gunboats to our correspondent.

In another development, the House of Representatives Ad hoc Committee on Niger Delta is set to meet with over 500 militant groups.

The Chairman of the committee, Mr. Abdul Ningi, told the News Agency of Nigeria correspondent in Abuja on Monday that the committee would, in the first week of May, meet with the militant groups and other stakeholders in the region.

"In our schedule, we have over 1,000 militant groups in the region, but we plan to visit at least half of them as well as other stakeholders during our meeting with people of the area soon," he said.

Ningi (PDP-Bauchi) said the committee at its meeting had agreed to spend 27 working days in the region with the hope of seeing the problems in the area themselves.

He added, "Our duty there is to look at PTDF, onshore and offshore fields, NDDC, various multinationals operating in the Niger Delta and take a look at their Memorandum of Understanding.

"We are also going to look at environmental degradation, poverty level and ecological funds."

He said the intervention of the House was to complement the efforts of the executive in

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the region and see how legislation would be used to solve the problems of the area.

Ningi, who is also the Chairman, House of Representatives Committee on Police Affairs, said the committee had made necessary security arrangements for their visit to the region.







He said the committee had received memoranda from members of the public and would analyse them along with what it would find on the ground.

Ningi said that the President was right in granting the amnesty and should, therefore, be encouraged in the overall interest of peace and stability.

The Speaker, Mr. Dimeji Bankole, in October 2008, had set up a 25-member ad hoc committee on Niger Delta to find a lasting solution to problems in the area.

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