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Niger Delta: 18 soldiers feared dead, eight others injured

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The Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, on Monday, said that the number of its men missing since its onslaught against militants in the Niger Delta began on May 13, 2009, had risen to 18.



Photo file
Chief of Defence Staff, Air Chief
Marshal Paul Dike

The Commander of the task force, Maj.-Gen. Sarkin-Yarki Bello, told journalists at a press conference at the 3 Battalion, Effurun, Delta State, that eight other soldiers had also been injured in gun battles with the militants.

Bello, however, did not give the names of the missing and the injured soldiers. One of the injured soldiers died on Sunday and had since been buried in Effurun.

According to him, bullet-riddled uniforms of one the soldiers and his service rifle were recovered from a shrine in Okerenkoko, one of the communities in Gbaramatu Kingdom in Delta State.

The JTF boss explained that a Lieutenant and 10 soldiers went missing on May 13, while the whereabouts of another Lieutenant and five others had remained unknown since May 15.

He vowed that the operation would continue until all the militant camps in Delta State were destroyed and the missing soldiers found alive or dead.

"The operation is still ongoing until we find our 18 missing troops, made up of two officers of the rank of Lieutenant in the Army and 16 soldiers, and bring those who are responsible for their fate to justice."

A top JTF commander told our correspondent that in the military, personnel known to be dead but whose bodies had not been recovered were listed as "missing in action."

By his reckoning, the militants must have killed the 18 missing soldiers.

The Minister of Justice and Attorney-General of the Federation, Mr. Michael Aondoakaa (SAN), had last Wednesday said that militants had killed seven soldiers.

"Militants have killed a Major, a Lieutenant Colonel and five rank and file," Aondoakaa said at the 30th anniversary of the Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies in Abuja.

Bello, who also invited the Pere of Gbaramatu Kingdom, Ogeh Gbaran III, over the alleged activities of militants in his domain, said the militants had, "hijacked" 18 weapons from the federal troops since the operation started.

He claimed that a few camps were still operating in that region and vowed that "we want to take our search to these areas."

The palace of the monarch was ransacked and razed last week by the troops, who raided Oporoza, the headquarters of Gbaramatu Kingdom.

The JTF boss said some documents and pictures allegedly recovered from the palace showed that some people had died in mysterious circumstances there.

Specifically, a picture of an old woman who appeared to have committed suicide with

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ropes around her neck was allegedly found in the palace of the Pere, who received his staff of office from Delta State Governor, Dr. Emmanuel Uduaghan, on April 9, 2009.

Bello said the monarch would also be questioned over some incriminating materials found in his palace.

"I am using this medium to invite the Gbaramatu king, I want to find out about his relationship with this notorious militant called Tompolo. I also want to know how some uncomplimentary documents and photographs managed to get to his palace. I really want to talk to him. I need to know why his palace was close to Tompolo's house," Yarkin-Bello said.

He added that other persons from the kingdom indicted in the course of the investigation into Camp 5, operated by Tompolo, would be invited by the agency for questioning.

He said there were revelations in the documents found in Camp 5 and Tompolo's residence in Oporoza. He said the camp was operated like a normal military establishment with well-kept records of all major activities.

He said, "Our findings in the palace of the Gbaramatu king and Camp 5 were disturbing. We (JTF) gathered information on the nature of Camp 5 and secured documents and pictures of the past and present troops of the camp.

"We have the pictures of troops in the camp with guns, and we have the duty rosters and payment schedules of the troops. We saw who supplied different items to the camp and how they were paid.

"We found the roster on the number of arms and ammunition signed for various duties and posting of troops to where and when. We have many military brochures and different kinds of manuals for soldiers in training from some countries. The camp 5 is a well organised security establishment in the region.

"We are on the trail of everybody involved in all deals with the camp. We have their names from the available records in the camp and Tompolo's house in Oporoza."

The general said a search in a cybercafe in Oporoza showed that Tompolo was the leader of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta.

Bello said the JTF planned to raid Odi in Bayelsa State in response to an intelligence report that an Ijaw militant, known simply as Ken was harbouring Tompolo.

He denied the reports that the troops employed maximum force in the operation, adding that the JTF did not attack individuals and communities not connected with militancy.



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