

Panic In Niger Delta

•3 Killed, Shell Pulls Out Relations Of Staff

Armed militants in Niger Delta have attacked a Total SA oil pumping station in Rivers State in an overnight raid that left three security guards dead and shut down the facility, both Reuters and Associated Press quoted a

company official today.

The Total official in Nigeria's capital of Abuja spoke anonymously because the information had not yet been cleared for public release.

He said the pumping station

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in the Obagi oil field, which normally produces about 50,000 barrels a day, had been shut down. He said he did not have further details.

Two private security contractors had previously reported an attack by armed men on the Total SA oil installation in Rivers state. They also spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press.

It was not immediately clear how many attackers were involved, or if they occupied the facility or took hostages.

The attack came as Royal Dutch Shell, Nigeria's largest oil operator, began evacuating hundreds of expatriate staff dependants from the region.

Shell's pullout involves about 400 foreign family members from residential compounds in Port Harcourt, Warri and Bonny Island. Staff will stay put and oil and gas production will not be affected, officials said.

"Dependants of expatriate staff are being relocated as a precautionary measure because of the explosion," said Shell spokesman Bisi Ojedian.

A senior Shell executive added: "We are not sure if this thing is going to deteriorate. If it deteriorates we will have fewer people to contend with."

Militancy and crime have risen dramatically this year in the vast wetlands region, which is home to all the OPEC member nation's oil and gas resources.

Attacks on oil facilities and kidnappings of workers have become an almost a weekly occurrence in the world's eighth largest oil exporter. But Monday's car bomb attack in the car park of a Shell residential compound in the region's largest city Port Harcourt notched up the pressure. No one was killed or injured, but nine cars were damaged.

Industry executives had been expecting security to decline before a landmark poll next April, because elections often reignite long-standing power struggles between rival clans and militias in the remote, lawless region.

Italian oil company Agip, a unit of ENI, has already transferred the families of its workers from the delta to Lagos. The Militants are still holding four foreign oil workers — three Italians and one Lebanese — after an attack on an Agip oil export terminal on Dec. 7. It accused Agip of offering ransoms for the workers on Wednesday and vowed to kill the four men rather than free them for cash.