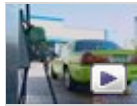


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## Nigerian militants launch new attacks in "oil war"

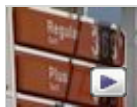
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By Austin Ekeinde

Mon Sep 15, 11:40 AM ET

PORT HARCOURT, Nigeria (Reuters) - Nigerian militants on Monday attacked a Shell-operated oil facility, forcing the evacuation of nearly 100 staff, in a third day of fighting with security forces in the Niger Delta.

Security sources said the three days of clashes were the heaviest between the two sides since the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) launched a campaign of violence in early 2006 saying they wanted more local control of the impoverished region's oil wealth.

MEND declared an "oil war" on Sunday and warned all oil workers to leave the delta immediately, threatening to disrupt production further in the world's eighth largest oil exporter.

"MEND reiterates its previous warnings to all oil workers in the entire Niger Delta region to evacuate from oil facilities and halt production with immediate effect or they will have themselves to blame," the group said in an e-mailed statement.

Two security sources in the oil industry, who did not want to be named, said more than 100 people may have been killed by the fighting, which has spread to at least seven villages in Rivers state.

The clashes have not yet affected oil production since some of the targeted facilities seem to have already been shut down by previous assaults. A fifth of the OPEC member's oil output has been shut down for the last two years due to the violence.

Oil traders shrugged off the news as prices traded at a seven-month low near \$94 a barrel on Monday.

### GUNBOAT ATTACK

Around 10 militant gunboats attacked a Royal Dutch Shell flow station and gas plant at Alakiri in Rivers state early Monday morning, a military spokesman said.

"The attack lasted over an hour. Dynamite and bombs were massively detonated by the miscreants," said Lieutenant Colonel Sagir Musa, spokesman for the military task force in Rivers state. "The situation is being closely monitored and is under control."

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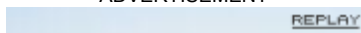
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A Shell spokeswoman said one person was killed and four others injured in the attack.

The company has reduced the number of employees at some of its Nigerian oilfields, but it could not specify how many or from which fields due to security reasons.

An industry source said nearly 100 staff were evacuated from the facility.

#### CASUALTIES

Musa said militants incurred heavy losses in the last three days and no soldiers had been killed. He would not specify the number of casualties. MEND said at least 22 soldiers and seven others were killed since Saturday. It was not possible to independently verify claims from either side.

The two oil industry security sources said the fighting involved the army, navy and air force.

"This is just the start of a major military offensive in the delta that is likely to continue for the next couple of weeks," a security source said.

"The military has declined to say how many people have died in fear of whipping up public sentiment against them," he added.

Musa on Sunday denied the military had launched a major offensive, saying it was responding to assaults from militants. MEND said the military attacks were unprovoked.

The Niger Delta is a vast network of narrow creeks and remote villages, and initial reports of fighting are often confused. The military and the militants regularly accuse each other of propaganda when clashes take place.

MEND has also attacked a Chevron oil platform and Shell-operated pipelines and gas plant in the last three days.

The deteriorating security situation in the delta, home to Nigeria's oil sector, is considered to be the biggest hindrance to economic growth in Africa's most populous country.

(Additional reporting and writing by [Randy Fabi](#) in Abuja; Editing by Caroline Drees)

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