



Nigeria MEND militants claim attack, threaten oil ships

March 2, 2012 | Filed under: News Updates | Posted by: admin

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(Reuters) – A Nigerian militant group based in the oil-producing Niger Delta claimed an attack on a police checkpoint on Thursday that killed four people, its second such claim after it said it blew up an oil pipeline last month in Africa's top crude producer.

"The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) confirms that the attack on a Nigerian marine police checkpoint on Thursday March 1, 2012, in Bayelsa state in the Niger Delta ... was carried out by our fighters," the statement from Jomo Gbomo, a spokesman for one of MEND's factions, said.

He said they were in contact with the group which had kidnapped three people in a pirate attack on a Dutch vessel on Tuesday and were considering taking them in. Earlier reports had said two were kidnapped.

MEND has been largely inactive since most of its militants agreed an amnesty with the government in 2009, ending a wave of attacks that at one stage cut oil production down by half.

But last month the group resurfaced when it said it had attacked an oil pipeline owned by Italian firm Eni. "MEND wishes to sound a warning to masters of oil industry vessels considering adopting manoeuvres aimed at preventing our fighters from boarding their vessels," the statement said.

"We will launch rockets at ... uncooperative vessels, and ensure such vessels are set alight, when we eventually board."

Militant activity in the Niger Delta, whose coastal areas pumps out most of Nigeria's more than 2 million barrels a day, has slowed to a trickle since the amnesty.

It is seen as more of a criminal enterprise making huge sums for oil thieves and pirates rather than a determined political movement.

Under the amnesty thousands of militants gave up their weapons, joined training schemes and drew stipends. Security sources say remaining gangs in the Niger Delta do not have the capacity to do the damage seen in the past.

But a resurgence of militant activity is an unwelcome headache President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, whose security forces are already stretched by an Islamist insurgency raging in the north.

Referring to the kidnapping by pirates of sailors near Port Harcourt on Tuesday, Gbomo said: "the kidnappers have offered to hand these sailors who are all in good health over to one of our camps in Rivers State. We are considering this offer as these men were not captured from a vessel related to the Nigerian oil industry," adding that two were Russians and one Filipino.

Analysts also suspect there may be a political dimension to the apparent revival of MEND. Local political rivalries in the delta, as elsewhere in Nigeria, are often inflamed by politicians who use guns for hire to settle scores.

Jonathan, who is from Bayelsa state in the Niger Delta, has fallen out with a powerful ex-governor Timipre Sylva, whom the ruling party prevented from running again in this year's governorship polls.

Stepping up the spat, the state prosecutor also charged Sylva with fraud and money laundering two weeks ago.

Such political disputes often trigger a spike in violence in the volatile Delta, although it is rare that anyone can prove a link between a politician and a specific militant attack. (Reporting by Tife Owolabi; Writing by [Tim Cocks](#))

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