



Niger Delta militants: Promise tougher times ahead for oil companies and their workers

Flames in the Niger Delta

Despite some political moves to assuage its people, the militants in Niger Delta vow that there will be no ceasefire until Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, is released from detention

By ANAYOCHUKWU AGBO

As the build-up to the final moments of the 2007 elections gathers momentum, the militants in the Niger Delta seem to have decided not to lay down their arms. They are insisting that government release Asari Dokubo, leader of the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, NDPVF, from detention.

Since December 7, 2006 when operatives of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND, kidnapped four expatriate oil workers, three Lebanese and an Italian working with ENI, a subsidiary of Nigerian Agip Oil Company at the Agip terminal in Brass, Bayelsa State, the Niger Delta has been awash with violence. This peaked on January 1 when unidentified gunmen randomly shot at residents celebrating the arrival of the new year at about 1.30 am at Rumuosi and Rumuekini communities on

the outskirts of Port Harcourt, killing seven people. Eyewitnesses said that the gunmen, who were dressed in military camouflage, operated in a Volkswagen mini-bus. About an hour later at Igwuta Road in Rumuokwurushi, three more people, including a policeman, were killed as the police engaged suspected cultists in a shoot-out.

Ireju Barasua, public relations officer of Rivers State Police Command, has confirmed the arrest of four suspects who are now helping the police in their investigations.

Prior to these, on Christmas day, gunmen killed five people at Elelenwo in Port Harcourt metropolis. It was a tough welcome for Felix Ogbaudu, the new police commissioner of Rivers State, who is just a few days old in office. A veteran of the Ngige political warfare in Anambra State, Ogbaudu told TELL last Wednesday that he would be firm and open in his resolve to maintain peace and order in Rivers State. He faces the stiffest challenge in his career in the inevitable clash between the police and the neighbourhood cults which the State Security Service, SSS, late last year raised the alarm that they were being sponsored by politicians in the state.

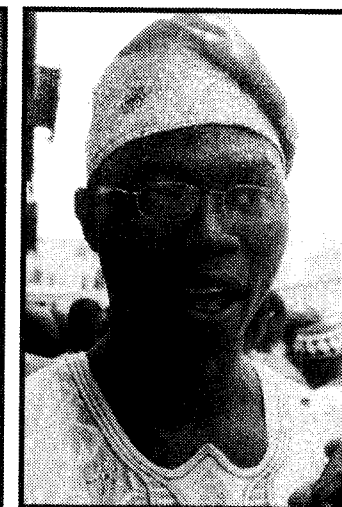
On January 2, there was also a fire scare at Ogbunabali, inside Port Harcourt metropolis, where many houses were reportedly razed. When TELL visited the location last Wednesday, it discovered it was just a little incident. The same day, another fire incident caused a scare at Elelenwo. At press time, the police were yet to make a connection between the fire incidents and the cult feud.

That notwithstanding, December 18, MEND detonated explosions in two prime oil targets in Port Harcourt: Shell and Agip residential areas. Jomo Gbomo, spokesman of the group, said in an e-mail statement that "both bombs were triggered by cellphones and were a cocktail of military and commercial explosives". He restated the warning that "all those with dealings with oil companies in the Niger Delta are to steer well clear of all facilities of these companies". According to him, "attacks against oil industry targets will increase, (and will) be carried out without warning and with extreme ruthlessness". He reasserted that "we are impervious to the unfolding political drama in Nigeria and still have as our goal resource control for the Niger Delta."

On the four hostages being held, Gbomo said attempt to secure their release



Fasehun and Adams: Freed



Uwazuruike: Still in custody

would be of no use. "All hostages seized in our attack on the Agip facility in Brass will be held indefinitely. They are in big trouble! The possible release of these individuals is directly tied to the release of hostages of Niger Delta origin in Nigerian government hands. We will capture more very soon until we have in our hands enough to trade with the Nigerian government," he said. As at last Thursday, all attempts to free the hostages by Agip and Bayelsa State government failed. MEND alleged that Agip paid a bribe of N70 million to secure the release of the hostages. "A middleman brought N70 million to one of our camps. Needless to say, the money has been confiscated and will be put to better use," MEND said in a

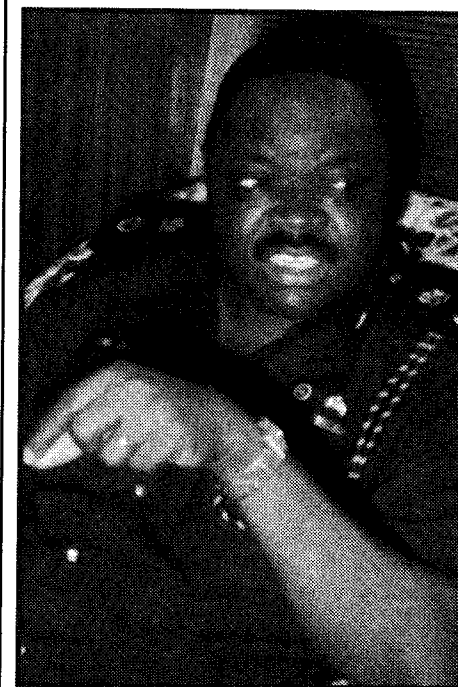
statement. Agip has, however, denied paying any money to MEND.

TELL's investigation showed a growing frustration within the militants community and even Ijaw leaders over the continued detention of Dokubo, who is now the symbol of the Niger Delta struggle. "As long as Asari is in detention, the Niger Delta is in jail," said Onengiyi Erikosima, his spokesman in Port Harcourt. He said that the appointment of a chief of army staff who is Ijaw, and the promise of vice president to the Niger Delta, plus the recent appointment of the first person from the Niger Delta as the commissioner of police in Rivers State were "a good point for the beginning of dialogue, but we are suspecting that they want to foment trouble...if it is not a set-up, let them release Asari."

There is also a growing suspicion in the South-south and South-east that the release of two leaders of the Odua People's Congress, OPC, Fredrick Fasehun and Gani Adams, as well as the continued detention of Dokubo and Ralph Uwazuruike, leader of the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, is a deliberate strategy to incite uprising in the two zones to jeopardise the 2007 elections.

On the recent killings in Port Harcourt, Erikosima said the true militants fighting for the emancipation of the Niger Delta were not responsible for them. He explained that theirs was "a higher cause" and that by their oath, it was an abomination with terrible consequences to attack colleagues in the struggle.

Whichever way the wind blows, the solution to the Niger Delta quagmire may begin with the release of Dokubo. If not, the militants warned that the four hostages currently in their custody would be "the last hostages".



Ogbaudu: Faces a herculean challenge

Dokubo: MEND wants him released

