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Niger Delta: Soldiers Kill 9 Militants

From Segun James in Yenagoa, 06.14.2007

Barely one week after renouncing violence and releasing the last sets of hostages to the Bayelsa State Governor, Mr. Timipre Sylva-Sam, militants operating in the Niger Delta creeks on Tuesday engaged Nigerian soldiers in a gun battle that left at least nine militants dead.

Two Nigerian soldiers were also reported to have lost their lives in the battle, although this was denied by military authorities.

The battle, which lasted about two hours, broke out Tuesday afternoon at Ogboinbiri Community in Southern Ijaw Local Government Area when a contingent of soldiers patrolling the creeks intercepted a speed boat laden with arms and ammunitions.

THISDAY gathered that an attempt by the soldiers to confiscate the deadly cargo was stoutly resisted by the militants.

This led to a confrontation which soon developed into a fierce battle, at the end of which 11 persons in all were killed.

The Commander of Bayelsa Volunteers, the state government owned security and anti-piracy outfit, Mr. Joshua Benemaisia, confirmed the incident.

But when contacted by THISDAY in Yenagoa, the state Police Public Relations Officer (PRO), Mr. Ibokette Iniobong, a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), could neither confirm nor deny the development. He said he was "in Abuja attending a conference."

On Monday evening, militants in the state had assured Governor Sylva-Sam, after releasing to him the remaining 12 expatriate and one Nigerian hostages earlier seized by them, that there would be no more hostilities in the creeks.

The Public Relations Officer of the Joint Task Force, Major Omale Ochaguwuda, also confirmed the attack.

He said no casualty was recorded on the side of the military during the gun battle that took place at Ogboinbiri Oil flow station belonging to Nigeria Agip Oil Company (NAOC), a subsidiary of the Italian oil giant, ENI International.

The unrest in the Niger Delta has been a source of serious concern to President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua who said the resolution of the problem in the Niger Delta was his top priority.

The President said he would, in consultation with the stakeholders in the zone, fashion out a blueprint to address the problem.

To this end, President Yar'Adua initially slated a National Forum on the Niger Delta crisis to hold two weeks ago but was postponed to allow room for more consultations with the stakeholders in the area.

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