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Okah, Militants' Leader, Feared Killed

• FG denies rumours of his death

By Paul Ohia in Lagos, George Oji in Kaduna and Ahamefula Ogbu in Port Harcourt, 02.20.2008

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has said one of its leaders, Henry Okah (aka Jomo Gbomo), who was extradited last week from Angola, died from gunshot wounds yesterday in a military hospital in Kaduna.

But Nigerian authorities have denied the rumour of his death, maintaining that Okah, who is suspected to be the one procuring arms for the militant groups, is still alive.

In an email yesterday, MEND said: "Disturbing reports just reaching us suggest that Okah succumbed to injuries from gunshot wounds at about 0400 hours today ... at a military hospital in Kaduna state ... after he was shot in what those interrogating him claim was an 'accidental discharge'.

"The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is giving the federal government ... the next 24 hours to confirm or deny this murder rumour," the group said, threatening further violence in the Niger Delta. But a military intelligence source who opted to be anonymous said the allegation is false, while Col Ganiyu Akinola, the Assistant Director, Army Public Relations, 1st Mechanised Division, Kaduna, told THISDAY: "I am not aware that he was brought to Kaduna in the first place not to talk of being killed. It is mere rumour and a figment of some people's imagination."

Presidential spokesman, Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, was quoted by BBC as saying Okah was in Abuja, adding: "I know that Henry Okah is alive. He is in safe custody."

MEND which has always claimed infiltration of the Directorate of Military Intelligence said that they received information that at 0400hrs, their leader died from the said gun shot wounds.

Okah led a wave of attacks on the oil industry that shut down a fifth of Nigerian output in 2006.

He was arrested in Angola on gun-running charges last September but MEND said he was transferred to Nigeria last Thursday.

Okah was allegedly in possession of a detailed list of war materials and military intelligence norms manuals they intended to buy in Angola, according to Eduardo Augusto, Interpol/Luanda's senior officer.

Since Nigeria and Angola do not have a formal extradition treaty, the two countries had to rely on the African Union (AU) convention on terrorism prevention and combat which condemns such acts.

The Angolan authorities adopted the convention through the 25/99 resolution of 27 August, 2007, of its National Assembly.

Factions loyal to Okah have carried out a string of attacks in the Niger Delta since his arrest last September.

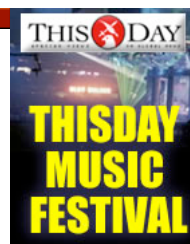
The militants claimed Okah's arrest in Angola was orchestrated by the Nigerian government, in part because he was sceptical of the government's talk of peace.

Mend is made up of a collection of armed groups, which are occasionally political, often criminal in their activities.

While other groups have called for a ceasefire after being offered government incentives, Okah's faction has remained active.

Okah's detention upset many of his old colleagues, and some have threatened to call off their self-declared truce.

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