

9 feared dead in militants' fresh attack

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- *Abduct 7, release 16 hostages kidnapped Monday*
- *Army threatens to carry out reprisal attack if...*
- *MEND vows to counter military offensive against Ijaw*

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"In the ensuing firefight, which lasted about one and a half hours, our units captured two gunboats, killing all occupants, nine soldiers," MEND said in a statement emailed to AFP.

There was no official confirmation of the MEND's statement at press time.

MEND said that at about 5 p.m. yesterday, its units dispatched to communities in Rivers State were attacked by nine gunboats and one helicopter gunship of the Nigerian Army.

"Our presence in Rivers State is being beefed up by about 500 fighters which had earlier been dispatched and will be in Rivers State by nightfall," the MEND statement said.

The group said that it was being "forced" to act ahead of its planned major strike on the nation's oil industry.

Alos, armed militants in the Niger Delta, had on Tuesday night, killed two Nigerians and abducted seven foreigners working for the US oil company, Exxon Mobil, in yet another attack, the third in two days.

The 16 remaining oil employees of a sub-contractor of Shell who were abducted by militants in the first of the latest round of attacks were released yesterday. Five soldiers were killed in that incident.

The attacks have drawn flak from the Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) which asked government to provide adequate security for its members and other innocent people in the Niger Delta.

The Army which lost five of its men in Monday's attack in Rivers State may carry out reprisal attack in the event of any soldier getting killed again.

The two Nigerians killed in Tuesday night attack were security guards at the residential quarters of the expatriates near Mobil exports terminal in Eket, Akwa Ibom State.

One of the kidnapped victims is a Romanian national, said Romania's ambassador to Nigeria, Emil Rapcea. "According to unconfirmed information, one of the five workers abducted is a Romanian," he said, adding that he was awaiting confirmation from the Nigerian authorities. The nationalities of the other four are not known.

The seven were seized late Tuesday by armed men who stormed their quarters. Sources said two Nigerian security guards were killed during the attack around 8.00 p.m. on Tuesday.

A company spokesman said the kidnapped workers were employees of a sub-contractor to Mobil. "They are not our direct employees but they work for a firm that has a contact with us," he said.

He said the incident had not affected the company's exports. "There are no disruptions in operation. Everything is going on smoothly," he said and urged the Nigerian security agencies to track down the attackers.

The militants carrying out Tuesday's attack were not immediately identified and there was no immediate claim of responsibility.

On Monday, about 70 men attacked a site belonging to the Royal Dutch Shell Company in neighbouring Rivers State, killing 14 soldiers and kidnapping 25 workers, military and company sources said. Nine of the workers were freed on Tuesday, and the remaining 16 were released yesterday.

Responsibility for that attack was claimed by the Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC), a

grouping of several militant movements. The JRC said in a statement that the attack was aimed at obtaining the immediate release of Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo Asari, the imprisoned leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF).

MEND vows to confront soldiers

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) which has claimed responsibility for kidnappings of foreign oil workers said early yesterday it had mobilised fighters to counter a military offensive by government.

The group in a statement claimed that the military was planning a siege on Ijaw communities following the killing of five soldiers in Rivers State on Monday. "In response to the build up of Nigerian military forces... we decided to send a number of our fighters into Rivers State to assist communities which we perceive will shortly be under siege by the Nigerian military," it said in the online statement.

"These fighters will remain in the vicinity of Rivers State until the perceived threat to Ijaw communities in Rivers State ceases to exist," it said.

The group denied responsibility for Monday's incident, but warned oil firms and personnel against depending on the Nigerian military for protection. "As long as the injustice persists in the delta, there will be no peace for those who loot the wealth of our oppressed people," it warned.

16 released

Also yesterday, militants released 16 remaining oil employees of a sub-contractor to Anglo-Dutch oil giant Shell two days after kidnapping a group of workers. "I can confirm that the remaining hostages were released this morning (yesterday). They were 24 or so in number. Nine were released yesterday (Tuesday)," the spokesman, who requested anonymity, said.

"The efforts paid off this morning (yesterday) when the remaining oil workers were released unhurt," the industry official, a spokesman for a major oil group, said, adding no ransom was paid.

He said the men were seized to "serve as a shield for the separatist fighters in their face-off with the Nigerian security agents. The men were upbeat. No harm was done to any of them."

Army on reprisal attack

Vanguard gathered yesterday that the army may, henceforth, carry out reprisal attacks against any group in the Niger Delta that kills a soldier. A military source said in Abuja that but for the intervention of the presidency, the army would have moved against those suspected of killing five soldiers in Monday's attack on a Shell facility in Rivers State.

"Who the hell do they (militants) think they are, by the way, that they should be gunning down Nigerian soldiers who are symbols of the nation's unity, peace and stability?" the source wondered.

"Or are they the only ones suffering from deprivation? Are they better than other Nigerians? Who looks after the families of these late soldiers now? They cannot continue to get away with this murderous attitude. What message are they sending to other parts of the country? It would look like if you kill soldiers in other parts of the country, you can't get away with it but if you do that in the Niger Delta, you go scot free. That

is not true."

Army denies attack

But spokesman for the Two Amphibious Brigade, Port Harcourt, Major Sagir Musa, denied yesterday that the army planned a reprisal attack on communities around Cawthorne Channel where five soldiers on guard duty were killed on Monday by militants.

The army PRO, who dismissed the fear, said the army was too responsible to indulge in that kind of lawlessness, adding that some communities in the area had been aiding the army in its search and rescue operation in the area since the incident.

Major Musa said he would be ready to speak on their findings and details of casualties at the end of the exercise. He, however, added that they had recovered two boats belonging to the militants that sank during the attack.

"People should not panic. Information at my disposal is that people are thinking the army would launch reprisal attack against neighbouring communities in the area. Let me assure responsible law-abiding citizens of the state and the local government that the army is not planning any reprisal attack. We are not thinking the militants have anything to do with the local governments."

Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association of Nigeria (PENGASSAN) has condemned the latest wave of violence and attacks on oil workers and facilities.

PENGASSAN in a statement by its acting General Secretary, Comrade Lumumba Okugbawa, reiterated the allegation by the association that it believed these unfortunate violence and hostage takings were being perpetrated by a high powered cabal operating

in the Niger Delta.

The association advised those involved in the attacks and hostage-taking to ceasefire against oil workers in Nigeria, reminding that Nigerians were also working outside the shores of Nigeria.

The oil workers under the aegis of PENGASSAN and its National Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) counterpart, recently went on a two-day strike to protest the insecurity of in the region.

He said: "Our attention has been drawn to reports on another hostage taking incident at Bristows residential compound at Eket in Akwa Ibom State where seven expatriates were kidnapped and also an attack on an oil vessel in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, where 16 of the 25 Shell Petroleum Development Company contractors are still missing. We believe these actions are perpetrated by a high powered cabal operating in the various levels of government in the Niger Delta masquerading under the title of militant youths against innocent workers."

"This recent hostage saga and violence are coming less than two months after the death of our late comrade, Nelson Ujeya, the Community Liaison Officer of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), who was abducted on the 8th of August, 2006 by militants from Letugbene community in Ekeremor Local Government area of Bayelsa State."

"Also, the militants launched a fresh attack close to Krakroma in Rivers State and Cawthorne Channel gas gathering plant at Elem-Kalabari in Asari-Toru council area of Rivers State, one of the major oil reserves in the region."

CBN selects 14 banks

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Affairs) of the CBN, Mr Festus Odoko, named the 14 banks and their foreign partners as Black Rock/Union Bank of Nigeria Plc; J.P. Morgan Chase/Zenith Bank Plc; H.S.B.C/First Bank of Nigeria Plc; BNP Paribas/Intercontinental Bank Plc; UBS/United Bank for Africa Plc; Credit Suisse/IBTC-Chartered Bank Plc; Morgan Stanley/Guaranty Trust Bank Plc; Fortis/Bank PHB Plc; Investec/Fidelity Bank Plc; ABN Amro/Access Bank Plc; Cominvest/Oceanic Bank Plc; ING/ Ecobank Plc; Bank of New York/ Stanbic Bank Plc; Crown Agents/ Diamond Bank Plc.

He said in a statement: "The Investment Committee of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) at its meeting of 3rd October, 2006 appointed external fund managers for our foreign reserves in order to allow for professional management, diversification of investment and leverage on the expertise of the foreign banks to transform Nigerian banks into global financial institutions."

"The CBN has traditionally kept the external reserves as deposits with foreign banks. This is the first time that it is appointing foreign assets managers to manage part of its reserves, in line with global best practice. As a first step, the Investment Committee decided to award mandates for US \$7 billion out of the CBN portion of the total external reserves. The \$7 billion is awarded to 14 out of 17 reputable Global Asset Managers which not only met the CBN's requirements for appointment as external assets managers, but also for partner-

ship ties with Nigerian banks.

"The three (3) other foreign institutions, namely: Barclays Bank (DCO), Deutsche Bank AG and Pacific Investment Management Company (PIMCO) were technically qualified but could not be awarded mandates because they did not have local partners."

"All the foreign institutions are reputable international asset managers with excellent track records each with a minimum credit rating of 'AA' by international rating companies. Except for Crown Agents, each of the selected Asset Managers has Asset under management in excess of US \$50 billion - indeed the volume of assets under their management ranges between US \$50 billion and US \$1.6 trillion. It further noted that in determining the amount of the mandate to each asset manager, consideration was given to the size of the shareholders' funds of its local partner."

"The effective take off of each mandate is contingent on the strength of the partnership between the local banks and their foreign partners. The CBN would be sending specific suggestions to each group to enable them strengthen their partnerships."

"Furthermore, the Investment Committee noted with satisfaction, the performance of the Nigerian banks which have branches in OECD countries which have been beneficiaries of small portions of the CBN's reserves as deposits. Consequently, the CBN has increased their deposit limits by US \$50 million each."