

Vista

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N-Delta: With car bombs, militants take battle to oil workers homes

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FEAR heightened last week in the Niger-Delta as militants again went on rampage. Just when many thought the region should be celebrating the emergence of one of theirs as running mate to the presidential candidate of the ruling PDP, militants struck at Shell and Agip. Precisely, it was on Monday; and unlike in the past when they would invade these places for hostages, they re-enacted their act at the Port Harcourt Army Barracks about nine months ago which led the army to evict about three hundred and fifty thousand of its civilian tenants at the Mammy Market area of the barracks.

Just like they did at the barracks, the militants drove their car straight to the car park in the residential area (RA) for Shell staff. They then planted some explosives there before fleeing to detonate from a distance. The resultant explosion burnt about nine cars parked in the area beyond recognition. It must be given to Shell, that the company was very timely in emergency response if, not more damages would have been done. No life was lost but it could not be ascertained if anybody sustained injury.

When *Sunday Vanguard* visited the Shell quarters, residents were being evacuated to safety. Nobody was allowed into the scene of the explosion. Security agents cordoned it off but from a distance, the debris could be seen. Even the charred remains of the vehicles could be seen.

At Agip, the story was similar. But it appeared the militants could not gain entrance into the premises. So, they had to drive close to the fence of the yard from outside, and then detonated their explosive device in the car. No significant damage was recorded except that the car carrying the device was severely burnt. Nevertheless, the police command in the State got the number which they gave as AZ 924 PHC, a Peugeot 304, in a release issued later.

From the way the militants went about the attacks, many believed that they would have wished their devices exploded in the operational areas of the oil firms, like the Agip yard and Shell industrial area. But may be they could not beat the



•Niger Delta militants...on rampage because of continued detention of their warlords?

security system on ground in these places was why they had to go to the residential area where security is relatively relaxed and for Agip, they hit the fence but from outside.

Companies reacted: The following day, Shell and Agip placed restrictions on movement. At the gate of the latter, visitors and staff were thoroughly screened before being allowed into the yard while for the former, no visitor was allowed in. But Shell staff with valid ID cards were allowed to resume work after being frisked at the main gate. The back gate at the industrial area was locked.

The company left a notice on the wall at the main gate for visitors. It reads: "Following the recent security incidents

around Port Harcourt in which some companies, including SPDC, have been targeted, the following precautionary measures are hereby introduced with effect from today, 19/12/2006. All entry into IA will be through the gate 1 (main gate). Only staff, with valid ID cards, will be allowed into the IA and other SPDC locations in Port Harcourt. All cars entering SPDC premises will be subjected to heightened security checks. The IA back gate (gate 3) will be closed and remain closed till further notice...

"Use of existing car parks is suspended till further notice. Such parking areas have been cordoned off. Staff with cars parked in IA and other SPDC locations in Port Harcourt are required to identify such cars to the police and subsequently remove them from the vicinity within the day. Cars not removed will be towed away, at owner's costs and risks, to the nearest NPF station."

Evacuation of families

Sunday Vanguard also gathered that Shell, Thursday, evacuated families and dependants of its expatriate workers from the region.

Rivers government steps in: The Rivers State government in a statement said it met with top management staff of the companies and security operatives in the state to ensure that the incidents do not re-occur in the state.

Condemning it, the government urged the people of the state to call 08068418347 when they have useful

information that can help track down those behind the acts. A government statement said: "the Rivers State government notes with great concern the recent explosions at the facilities of two oil majors in Port Harcourt. We wish to reiterate once again that these acts of criminality are unacceptable to the government and people of Rivers State, as they are inimical to the development of the state and the nation."

Why the boys struck: There were

speculations in some quarters that the militants may have done all they could to draw attention to the four hostages in their custody since December 7 and might have been very worried that the issue was not gaining attention in government. In the past, palpable frenzy greeted such situations. It is possible that the PDP primaries drowned the issue. But, in their statement, the militants gave the continued detention of Ijaws as one of the reasons for the attacks.

This has become the song for all kinds of criminalities in the region. Even when it is clear that hostage taking has become a commercial venture, those behind it still flaunt this for their actions. Meanwhile, MEND, which claimed responsibility for the explosion, in its statement, said, "Today, Monday, December 18, 2006, operatives of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger-Delta (MEND) planted three car bombs in locations strategic to the oil industry in the Niger-Delta."

"An operative in one location reported a concentration of civilians at his location and that bombing was aborted at the very last minute to prevent loss of innocent lives. The other two bombings were directed at Shell R.A. and Agip in GRA all in Port Harcourt, Rivers State in the Niger-Delta. Both bombs were triggered by cell phone and were a cocktail of military and commercial explosives. Again, we warn all those with dealings with oil companies in the Niger-Delta to steer well clear of all facilities of these companies.

"We have previously warned all Nigerian workers at the Agip terminal in Brass to vacate that facility. This warning will not be repeated. Attacks against oil industry targets will increase, be carried out without warning and with extreme ruthlessness. We are impervious to the unfolding political drama in Nigeria and still have as our goal, resource control for the Niger-Delta. Until this and every single one of our demands is met, the Nigerian government and oil industry will persistently bear the brunt of our rage.

"Finally, we warn all in the oil industry to disregard the assurances of frauds who have been misleading General Obasanjo and the oil companies. These criminals have no respect from us and were never delegated to represent us. 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 shall capture more very soon until we have in our hands enough to trade with the Nigerian government." The sad side of the militants attacks in the region is that they render many homes fatherless. Most of the victims of their attack in many cases have been found to even be from the region.

Thursday's attack on Elf: The region was yet to recover from the Monday car

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bombings when in the early hours of Thursday, some militants again struck at an Elf location at Obagi in Rivers State. Though they could not gain entry into the yard, in an ensuing gun battle between them and security operatives attached to the location, three mobile policemen were killed. The militants reportedly also lost two of their men.

When it dawned on them that they were being overpowered, they were said to have fled through the water ways, taking their corpses along. Sources in the area said they even set fire on the bus they drove into the jetty before disappearing in their speed boat. This development, *Sunday Vanguard* gathered, did not affect production capacity in that oil location.



•Niger Delta militants...in control of the creeks