

Soldiers kill Ateke's second in command during shoot-out with militants

By Jimitota Onoyume

PORT-HARCOURT—A MAN suspected to be the second in command of a cult group allegedly led by Tom Ateke was reportedly killed yesterday in a shoot out between soldiers and militants at Okrika which lasted several hours.

In a telephone conversation with the *Vanguard* on the incident, the army PRO in the state, Major Sagir Musa said the militants were the first to open fire on men of the Joint Task Force deployed to the area to maintain peace.

He said in the ensuing shoot out that lasted several hours the second in command of the dreaded cultist was killed.

He continued that the militants later retreated and came back. But unknown to them the army had also deployed a reinforcement team to assist those on ground to crush the situation.

In another exchange of gun fire that same yesterday, he

said the militants suddenly realized how weak they were and fled. Major Sagir said no casualty was recorded on the side of the army. The army according to him, later commenced what he called a 'cordon off operation' in the area.

Houses in the area were thoroughly searched while people were frisked on the streets before being allowed to go about their activities.

The Army PRO said peace had since returned to the area. He, however, declined to comment on arrests or arms recovered during the operation.

He said: "Okrika is regarded as one of the flash points in the state because it is the home of Ateke and some of the bad boys. The place is noted for thuggery, as a result, the Joint Task Force Commander stationed permanent troops in the area; the aim is to protect the area. But the boys were not happy, they attacked the men and it was a similar thing that

happened yesterday. They attacked our men and we fired back and killed the second-in-command of Ateke.

"They retreated and came back. But unknown to them we had a reinforcement. The shooting lasted for about four hours. Our cordoned and search operation to recover arms ended minutes ago. The people of Okrika were very happy with the army.

"They were jubilating this morning when they saw our men. It shows that they are tired of the evils of the militants," he said.

Meanwhile, two Italian hostages, Cosma Rucco and Franco Arena, in the custody of MEND since December 7, 2006, were yesterday released in the creeks to a journalist from their country, Massimo Alberizzi. The released hostages work for Saipem a subsidiary of Agip.

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