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By Emma Amaize, Sam Oyadongha, George Onah, Kingsley Omonobi &amp; Jimitota Onoyume

Posted to the Web: Wednesday, July 11, 2007

WARRI— MEN of the Joint Task Force in the Niger Delta, Operation Restore Hope, on Monday evening foiled an attempt by militants to kidnap some Koreans working for an oil service company, Daewoo, at Mbiama, a border town between Bayelsa and Rivers States.

One of the militants was shot dead and two captured alive by soldiers on guard at the company, while other members of the gang escaped. British toddler, Margaret Hill, who was abducted and freed last Sunday night by militants is still in shock and reacting frightfully to happenings around her, her mother, Oluchi, has said.

The Acting Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Mike Okiro, reacting yesterday to the spate of abductions in the Niger Delta said the situation was hampering the economic growth of the country.

Commander of the JTF, Brigadier-General Lawrence Ngubane, who confirmed the killing of one of the militants and arrest of two others told Vanguard in Warri that dynamites, AK-47 rifle, 60 rounds of 7.62 mm special ammunition and a bus used for the operation were recovered from the kidnappers, who were being held as at 5.00 p.m, yesterday, at Effurun headquarters of the Task Force.

The Task Force has since beefed up security in the company and residents of Yenagoa are happy that the soldiers were able to thwart the ambition of the militants.

Commander, Army Task Force, Colonel A. O. Umahi, who briefed newsmen at the JTF headquarters in Effurun said the militants arrived the company in a bus at about 9.40 p.m. on Monday and started firing into the air to scare and intimidate the occupants.

He said the troops withstood their firepower and eventually overpowered them, killing one and capturing two, while others fled.

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Umahi said no JTF man was injured in the gun battle.

Vanguard gathered that unlike sometime, last year, when the militants were able to overrun a site at Ogu, on the Yenagoa water front, the battle-ready military men gave the militants no room to advance and the only option left for them was either to surrender or retreat into the forest.

The remains of the deceased militiaman and the two others captured were first conveyed to the JTF base in Yenagoa Monday night and later transferred to the security outfit headquarters in Effurun yesterday

Meanwhile, motorists going in and out of Yenagoa were subjected to thorough screening at checkpoints mounted by men of the Joint Task Force, backed by armoured tanks while gunboats were sighted patrolling the Yenagoa water front.

Margaret in shock

British toddler, Margaret Hill, who was freed last Sunday night after four days in captivity, is still in shock and reacting frightfully to happenings around her environment, her mother, Oluchi, has said.

“When she sees security men with gun, especially those around us, she jerks and holds tight to me or her father. She wakes up with a startle every now and then. I try often to be awake to talk her to sleep,” Oluchi said.

Speaking to Vanguard in her Port Harcourt residence, yesterday, Oluchi said the girl had never been exposed to such treatment of being threatened with knife or gun. She was just a little sweet girl who loved her environment and felt free always.

She said, but “the girl has changed and I know this because every mother knows how her child reacts to situations or behaves”, adding that she was being treated by “an expatriate doctor of malaria, shock and other ailments that we have discovered since” she regained her freedom.

“I couldn’t eat or sleep for the days she was held and it was very traumatic for us, myself, the father and the entire household. We shall be taking her abroad very soon for an exhaustive medical attention,” Oluchi said.

Yar’Adua sends solidarity message

Meanwhile, President Umaru Yar’Adua has sent a message of solidarity through his spokesman, Mr. Segun Adeniyi, to Mr. and Mrs. Hill on the release of their daughter by those who took her captive last week.

Yar’Adua’s message which was delivered by Adeniyi at the home of the Hills said he and his family shared with the Hills their pain and anguish while the abduction lasted. He was gladdened by the fact that Nigerians rose in unison to condemn the abduction of Margaret.

“Our nation rose up as one against the horrendous inhumanity of the violent kidnapping of an innocent three-year old on her way to school. Her safe return was mainly due to the overwhelming pressure which leaders of the local communities, the state government and federal

security agents brought to bear on her abductors,” he said.

He prayed “this harsh ordeal does not leave any lasting scars on the psyche of your brave little girl,” and expressed confidence that the present administration would work towards an enduring peace and security in the Niger Delta.

Reacting to speculations that the Federal Government acted swiftly in seeking the release of the child because of her half British parentage, the spokesman said it was not true and that government was sensitive to every such incident.

“If you have been following events, even internationally, you will realise that some events happen that catch the attention of the world like the abduction of this three-year old girl. There is no life that is more important than the other..

“The three-year-old girl is a Nigerian, the mother is a Nigerian. It is not a question of whether the girl is British. It has to do with the circumstance of the abduction. The girl was going to school and the car was broken into. The thing was done in a commando style. Maybe, it was the manner of the abduction, which caught the attention of the world and the demanding of ransom for a three-year-old girl, these are the issues. It is not as if the girl was more important than anyone else,” he said.

Okiro raises alarm

Inspector-General of Police, Mkr. Mike Okiro, yesterday raised an alarm over the danger posed to Nigeria’s economy by the activities of Niger Delta militants, saying they were not only hampering the growth of the area but also scaring away expatriates whose input are needed for rapid development of the country.

Consequently, he ordered Commissioners of Police of Niger Delta states and other volatile states in the country to work out a new strategy of checkmating the activities of militants in whatever form as the nation could no longer tolerate the negative consequences of their actions.

Speaking at a meeting with DIGs, AIGs and all states’ CPs, Okiro said: “We are not happy about the incidence of hostage taking which is now happening in various corners and assuming new dimensions. So I am directing that you (CPs) must take immediate actions to ensure there is no more hostage taking.”

Observing that enough sensitisation was needed in the Niger Delta to make the militants understand the consequences of their actions, the IG said: “A situation where the Niger Delta people have been complaining of lack of development, complaining of marginalisation, and the government has come to develop the area, yet the militants are not allowing improvement is worrisome.

“They (government) award contract to foreigners to build roads, build bridges, and the contractors are kidnapped. Where they build factories to generate employment for the youths, the workers are kidnapped. Even the Port Harcourt Airport which was to be developed has stopped work because the workers are afraid they will be kidnapped.

“And the East-West road, which I am told is the highest single contract

ever awarded by the Federal Government, has been abandoned because the workers are afraid of being kidnapped. These are the areas we have to sensitise the people to let them realise that if they kidnap these workers, they are denying development to the Niger Delta area,” he said.

Revealing that other interests might be cashing in on the lucrative business of kidnapping, Okiro said: “During investigation when we arrested one or two people connected with kidnapping, we found out that even the suspects who did the kidnapping are from states contiguous to the Niger Delta and not in Niger Delta per se. So you find that this act is completely a criminal matter, not political.”

#### Dead ASP, others promoted

Meanwhile, the Police ASP who lost his life when officers of the Edo State Police Command confronted seven dare-devil armed robbers, killed them and recovered the N7. 5 million the robbers earlier stole from the Ikpoba Hill branch of UBA, Mr. Joseph Atahudo, has been promoted Deputy Superintendent post-humously by the Inspector General for gallantry.

Also, other 24 officers who partook in the operation that eventually led to the success against the robbers have been promoted to the next rank. Commissioner of Police, Edo State, Mr Abass Hassan, had earlier told reporters that two AK-49 rifles, two Pump Action Rifles and one Tripod Rifle as well as 79 rounds of live ammunition were recovered from the robbers.

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