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## COVER STORIES

### 20 feared killed in fresh onslaught in Rivers\* Ateke Tom pleads for amnesty

By Jimitota Onoyume

Posted to the Web: Friday, August 24, 2007

PORT HARCOURT — REGARDLESS of the massive deployment of soldiers on the streets of Port Harcourt in the aftermath of the recent cultists' activities in Rivers State, armed cultists yesterday struck afresh at Rumuekpe in Emohua Local Government Area of the state, killing 20 people.

One Baribor Kerebion was also reportedly matcheted to death at Bodo yesterday by people suspected to be cultists. Emohua local government area is a short distance from Port Harcourt.

The state government has, in the meantime, extended the curfew imposed on the state by another week with a view to consolidating the relative peace in the state capital.

One of the main gang leaders locked in the supremacy battle in the state, Ateke Tom, has also reportedly applied to Governor Celestine Omehia for pardon.

Efforts to get the state Commissioner of Police, Mr. Felix Ogbaudu, or the Police PRO, Mrs. Baresua Ireju, to comment on yesterday fresh attack failed. A police source, however, said nine persons were killed.

Community sources put the death toll at over 20. Sources said the community had been embroiled in a chieftaincy/youth leadership tussle for some time now. One of the groups in the disagreement reportedly mobilised the gunmen swho launched the attack.

The army PRO in the state, Major Sagir Musa, said the army had not been briefed on the incidents. He, however, vowed that the army was ready to crush any mayhem in any part of the state.

The state Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, Mr. Okey Wali, who announced the extension of the curfew after a meeting of the State Executive Council said the exco deliberated on the security situation in the state and commended the steps taken to secure lives and property, emphasizing that the need to sustain the gains recorded necessitated the

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extension of the curfew by one week.

Mr. Wali said the executive council also expressed gratitude to President Umaru Yar'Adua and the Service Chiefs for their interest and love for Rivers people and the prompt action taken to ensure that peace returned to the state.

The Commissioner said the council considered the statement from some indigenes of Rivers State in collaboration with some non-indigenes who addressed a press conference in Lagos calling for emergency rule in the state and described their action as most regrettable because there was no basis for such a call.

He explained that the problem in the state was that of cultism and all such security problems were being adequately handled by the security agencies, pointing out that internal security and defence of the country is the responsibility of the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Mr. Wali asked Rivers people to take interest in the return of peace to Port Harcourt and the state in general and urged the elders involved in the statement to retrace their steps and join hands to take the state to the next level.

Ateke pleads for amnesty

Meanwhile, one of the cultists on the wanted list of security agencies in Rivers State and leader of the Niger Delta Vigilante, Ateke Tom, has reportedly applied to Governor Celestine Omehia for pardon. Tom in a letter allegedly urged government to guarantee his safety.

He said since the peace/reconciliation parley he had with other cult groups at Okrika on July 14 he has been shunning violence. Meanwhile, when Vanguard contacted the Secretary of the Peace and Rehabilitation Committee constituted by the state government to rehabilitate reformed cultists in the state, Mr. Jerry Needam, if he was aware of any letter to the governor from Tom for forgiveness, he merely said the Governor had not granted amnesty to anybody but declined to say if there was such letter before the governor.

According to the letter, Tom said his boys were not part of the recent cult mayhem in the state. His words: "Your Excellency, I use this medium to deny any involvement in the recent spate of shootings in the city of Port Harcourt. I did not and will never again engage in such conduct.

"Sir, I believe that your public and unambiguous offer of amnesty to all who renounce violence is genuine; and I and NDVM members hereby request and appeal to be rendered the amnesty promised by you. With the granting of amnesty to me and my members and the guarantee of our safety by your government, I am sure the process of peace in our land will be complete," he said.

The spokesman of the JTF in the state, Major Musa, who also could not confirm the letter, however, said the JTF was not in the state to harm lawful and responsible citizens. He said any cultist offering to surrender would not be killed by the soldiers.

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