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Posted to the web 22 March 2008

Jimitota Onoyume

At least five naval gun boats exploded yesterday morning in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The explosion provoked different reactions from the main militant group (MEND) and the Naval authorities.

Sources said yesterday that an unconfirmed number of uniformed personnel were feared dead in the explosion.

When contacted on phone to comment on the development, the Navy Pathfinder PRO, Lieutenant Way Olabisi denied any loss of navy personnel.

According to him, some suffered injuries from effort to rescue some badges and boats around the vicinity of the fire. He said the explosion was triggered off by electrical faults.

"Yes there was explosion on one of our gun boat this morning when our men were about to go on their routine patrol. The fire started from the electrical line as they were about to cast off. It is not true that any of our men lost their lives. But some sustained injury while trying to rescue other boats around the scene of the fire. The fire has been put out through combined effort."

Meanwhile, Spokesman of the army and Joint Task Force in the state, Lieutenant Col said about two Navy personnel might have died in the incident. In a text message to the Vanguard on the development, he said about three boats and one barge was torched by the fire.

"There was an electrical explosion this morning at about 0900 hours at the NNS Pathfinder jetty. It was purely an accident caused by electrical mishap."

About three boats and a barge were torched and casualty figures are still being collated. It is feared that one or two of our men might have died in the process."

Another top source in the Navy who spoke under condition of strict anonymity told the Vanguard that five navy personnel lost their lives in the explosion. While five gun boats were affected. And of this number four were destroyed. The source was not assertive on the cause of the explosion but noted that at press time the inferno had been extinguished.

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"Five gunboats were affected but four destroyed. The five persons that died did out of panic. They were sailing out on patrol. The development might not be unconnected with the activities of militants."

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**Conflict, Peace and
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In an online interview with Jomo Gbomo of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, his militant group claimed responsibility for the explosion. His statement reads "This was sabotage on two gun boats by our men inside the Navy. This was done to retaliate the killing of innocent civilians by the Nigerian Navy who used their gunboat to crash into a passenger ferry without even an apology for the loss of life."

But it is very likely MEND had no clear knowledge of the incident before the online interview.

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