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JTF shoots passenger boat in error, kills 3

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Written by Samuel Oyadongha & Emma Amaize
Tuesday, 26 August 2008

**12 killed, MEND insists; vows to retaliate*

MEN of the Joint Task Force (JTF) on routine patrol in the creeks of Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa State, Sunday evening, shot a passenger boat in error.

Three of the passengers were feared dead, but the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said yesterday that 12 died.

The driver of the ill-fated boat simply identified as Clever escaped death but is currently receiving treatment in a hospital at Ukubie. A bullet was said to have grazed his skull.

The incident which occurred at about 5 p.m. at Lobia II in the Southern Ijaw council area yesterday triggered tension around Lobia and Ukubie after military gunboats reportedly took over the route over fear of reprisals by aggrieved youths of the area. Consequently, hundreds of commuters on the route were stranded.

The deceased identified as Peter Sese, a final year student of the Niger Delta University (NDU) and his fiancée, Titi, and another passenger whose name could not be immediately ascertained were reportedly travelling to Lobia in the Southern Ijaw council area when they met their untimely end.

Witnesses told Vanguard that the passenger boat might have been shot in error by the military men in a gunboat who mistook the occupants for militants.

The military men, it was gathered, had reportedly earlier heard sounds of gunshots from a boat similar to the ill-fated boat.

A security source who spoke on condition of anonymity said occupants of the boat from which the sound came had threatened to attack the soldiers.

It was gathered that less than 15 minutes after the alleged encounter, the ill-fated boat said to be similar to the one that had earlier passed also came along, prompting the soldiers to open fire on it.

Three of the occupants died while the driver narrowly escaped death as he jumped into the river. Sensing trouble that the tragic incident could trigger fresh security problems in the area especially for the oil servicing firm, the military authorities were said to have deployed additional four gunboats on the creeks with the result that no boat could navigate through route for fear of incurring the wrath of the military men.

The tense atmosphere in the creeks, Vanguard gathered, almost caused boat drivers plying the creeks to down tools in protest over the tragic shooting at Lobia.

When Vanguard visited the Nembe waterfront, boat drivers and other passengers were seen discussing the matter in groups just as some emissaries from the Maritime Union were said to have been dispatched to the area to ascertain the cause of the incident and search for the remains of the missing passengers.

Contacted, the Commander of the Joint Task Force, Lt. Col Chris Musa, described the incident as untrue and promised to furnish Vanguard with detailed report today while the Police Public Relations Officer, Mr. Iniobong Ibokette (DSP), said the command was yet to receive the information from the creeks.

MEND threatens to retaliate

But MEND in a statement said: "The JTF's explanation of the attack, which led to the death of 12 passengers and one critically injured survivor made up of students, women and children was that they heard the sound of gunfire minutes before the emergence of the passenger boat.

"This unfortunate killing of innocent civilians again calls for the replacement of the military task force with the police in civilian areas. It is clear that the soldiers acted out of panic and indiscipline and may even have been drunk.

"MEND will not issue any threat over this painful waste of lives but will retaliate at the appropriate time before notifying the public.

"We call on the Bayelsa State government to investigate the incident and compensate the families of the victims as soon as possible."

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