

# 15 feared killed as militants, military clash

- 27 hostages caught in crossfire
- MEND/JTF trade claims

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**A**BOUT fifteen persons were feared dead yesterday when men of the Joint Task Force, JTF, and some militants clashed on the waterways at Elem Tombia in Rivers State. The militants in an online statement issued under the aegis of Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, MEND, said they lost seven men while community sources said the

death toll was higher including some innocent lives. The militant group claimed that 27 hostages were caught in the crossfire.

Tension heightened in the area at press time. But the JTF said things had been brought under control. Meanwhile, MEND, in its online statement which it updated regularly, alleged that it fired at one of the helicopters used by the security body, a claim the spokesman for the army and the JTF in the state, Lieutenant Colonel Sagir Musa, denied.

MEND said, "Tombia, Rivers State, 1245 hours: MEND fighters

have suffered about three casualties and RPG's were fired on two army attack helicopters that came at close range. We suspect one of them may have been damaged. The helicopters were repelled and have not returned. No news of enemy casualties. Fierce fighting is still going on with MEND fighters adopting guerrilla tactics. At about 0900 hours today, September 13, 2008, the armed forces of Nigeria began a full scale aerial and marine offensive on the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) positions and neighbouring Ijaw communities in Rivers State with helicopter gunships, jet fighters and over 20 gun boats and landing crafts filled with heavily armed soldiers mainly from the northern axis of Nigeria.

"We hold the governor of Rivers State and the president of Nigeria accountable for the genocide on the defenseless civilians who are bearing the brunt of indiscriminate air force bombs. All MEND positions in the Niger Delta will respond to this unprovoked attack coming at a time the government is canvassing the so-called Niger Delta Ministry to hoodwink the people. Rotimi Amaechi, the governor of Rivers State must realize that this action also puts his family and community at the risk of reprisals with dire consequences. Oil companies are warned to move out their workers within the next 24 hours because a hurricane is about to sweep through oil installations in the entire Niger Delta region. An update on the fighting will be continuously relayed."

Continuing with an update mail, the militant body said they had so far killed about seven soldiers in the encounter. The mail read: "1500 hours: Seven fighters have so far been lost in the attack by the army on our position in Rivers State with several others injured. Three army helicopter gunships returned and began firing missiles indiscriminately into the mangrove vegetation's because of the excellent camouflage of our men and boats. We cannot tell the casualties from the army who have suffered some losses from sniper rifles. This may be the beginning of a full scale oil war."

Responding to the claims, the JTF spokesman said they did not lose any soldier. According to him, the RPG rifle which the militants claimed to have used on its

helicopters was not even within the distance area of an aircraft. The boys are lying. We have not lost any soldier. And again RPG is not even within the distance area of an aircraft."

Musa said the JTF had only one helicopter hovering in the area. He added that contrary to the claim of the militants that the army invaded the area, they (JTF) were on routine patrol of the waterways when militants opened fire on their gun boats. And in self defense, according to him, they had to retaliate. "In order to checkmate recurrent sea piracy and related militants, criminal acts on our water ways, the JTF Operation Flush III maintains regular marine patrol of identified notorious water ways. It was on such patrol that today at about 1035 hours at Elem Tombia, an unknown group of militants opened fire on our patrol team which resulted to an exchange of fire. The aircraft seen hovering around was just for routine surveillance and reconnaissance. It was a minor encounter, no cause for alarm. No

casualty recorded on our side and the state is under control", he stated.

The spokesman feared that the militants would have suffered some casualty. On its part, the Rivers State government, yesterday, urged people of the state not to panic as security operatives had the capacity to deal with the situation. In a statement issued by acting chief press secretary to the governor, Mr. Blessing Wekina, the government said it would not be distracted by threats from miscreants in the state. "Governor Rotimi Amaechi remains focused on his mission to develop the state. People should not be scared as the security agencies have capacity to respond to any attack from any quarter", Blessing said.

In another statement, yesterday, MEND said men of the Red Cross and doctors should be allowed access to some hostages injured in the attack. According to the militant body, they had rescued some hostages and they were kept in one of the camps allegedly invaded by the soldiers yesterday. "The 27 oil workers rescued yesterday by MEND from the pirates that kidnapped them from the MT Blue

Ocean and taken to the camp under attack to be offered as a reward leverage for the release of Henry Okah are trapped in the fighting between our fighters and the Nigerian military forces. The workers are made up of five expatriates from Britain, South Africa and Ukraine, while the remaining twenty two are Nigerians. It was learnt that the military on faulty intelligence as usual embarked on what is now a botched rescue attempt.

"Some of the oil workers are injured but are being treated with the same local herbs we are using in treating our wounded. The Red Cross or doctors from MSF should be allowed passage to attend to them. Injuries are mainly from high caliber machine guns and shrapnel. Meanwhile, two civilian communities; Elem Tombia and Ogboma have been razed to the ground by the rampaging soldiers who have not been able to take our positions. Civilian casualties are high." It would be recalled that the hostages were taken when some militants hijacked the vessel around Sombriere river in the state some days ago.

## New ministers to get two year mandate

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that there are some ministers who currently have no ministries," he said. According to Adeniyi, having worked with the ministers for this long, the president is in a position to take an informed action on his cabinet since he now knows the strong as well as the weak points of all the ministers. He explained that the president had been having weekly sessions with ministers and directors of their ministries which afforded the ministers the opportunity to defend government policies.

Adeniyi stated that the unworkability of the ministries merged under Obasanjo administration was noticed in the early days of the Yar'Adua regime. "The president decided there was no point discarding an idea that had not been tested, arguing that if it ended up not working, as it has now happened, there would be useful lessons to learn," the aide stated. The presidential spokesman said the president was ready to drive the ministers that would survive the cabinet shake up by giving everyone of them targets and deadlines for service delivery which he said would not exceed two years.

He explained further the shape of things to come: "For the Ministry of Works, for instance, there are some roads the president wants delivered through the 'Build, Operate

and Transfer' (BOT) model before the end of his administration. These include the Lagos-Badagry express road, Lagos-Ibadan Express road, Benin-Ore-Shagamu express road, Abuja-Kaduna-Kano express road and a few others I cannot readily remember. Those that are not economically viable, the Federal Government will construct. "The president has a programme of action with timelines and deliverables on these roads which means that whoever is handed the works ministry has his work cut out for him".

Speaking on the power sector, Adeniyi said the minister who would be appointed to that ministry must be able to deliver on 6,000 megawatts by the end of next year and 10,000 by the end of 2010, adding that anything less would not be acceptable to the president. Speaking on the Niger Delta Ministry, the presidential aide expressed confidence that the environmental and infrastructural as well as human development of the region would be handled by the administration, adding that part of the discussion with the British government was a proposal for a maritime institute to train personnel to contain the security situation in the region as well as in the Gulf of Guinea.

## Anyaku laments fate of Nigerians migrating abroad

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**F**ORMER secretary general of the Commonwealth, Chief Emeka Anyaku, has lamented the way poverty drives many Africans to Europe despite the hazardous situations they face there.

Anyaku, who spoke yesterday at the 2008 founder's day celebration organized by the Development Policy Centre in memory of Professor Ojetunji Abovade who died on December 31, 1994, said he was distressed whenever he read about the desperation of many Africans who crossed the borders to dare hazardous journeys to the opportunities of wealth and employment that they see in the North.

According to him, "I get distressed whenever I read of yet another boat capsizing with so

many loss of lives of Africans daring to get to Europe through the Mediterranean sea. At the same time, however, the US and the EU are creating fortress America and fortress Europe to block or contain these migrations." Although he condemned the influx of Africans into these countries, he viewed that continued denial of Africans by these countries would still be an explosive issue in the years to come.

While identifying seven major developments that pose major challenges to the old declining order and more opportunities for the more desirable globalization under the topic, "Globalization and the developing countries", he said in as much as it is incontrovertible that the US is still the hegemonious power, it is not true that the US alone can guarantee global security.

Anyaku said, "the biggest power on earth in history has become practically disempowered. With all its electronic military

gadgets and billions of dollars as well as global alliances, the mightiest power on earth has failed to provide global security. Even with the help of NATO, it has so far failed to defeat the Talibans in a small nation like Afghanistan".

On the economic resuscitation, he called on the Federal Government to revamp the moribund manufacturing firms across the country adding that the FG should "formulate policies that would reverse the closure of textile and tyre manufacturing companies in the country" to alleviate the suffering of the people. He added, "new development strategies that should be put in place must be genuinely people-driven. It must be participatory developing strategies that will first and foremost, satisfy the basic needs of the people." He stressed further that the US and Europe which were pushing for trade liberalization are now becoming protectionist.