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## VANGUARD

### Nigeria: Kidnappers Hold Rivers State Hostage

Jimitota Onoyume

7 February 2009

Hostage taking certainly is not new to the Niger Delta region. It gained currency about four years ago. But until recently it was unheard of that a toddler was killed to ease the process of abduction in the region.

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Or a religious leader taken hostage. Another thing that appeared sacrilegious to many was that these rampaging militants also last week defied the sanctity of a traditional stool in Bayelsa, the heart of agitations in the region to abduct the wife of the occupant of the stool.

These are instances of how far militants in the region have dragged 'agitation' for better attention from the federal government to the region. Or how best can one put it? Because at the moment it is difficult to state when abduction is for commercial purpose or to promote the struggle of the region.

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This is so because virtually all hostages that have been bold to speak about their tales after their release have always said that the key factor behind their abduction was money. The boys want money. And to justify their criminal actions they tie it to agitation in the region. In any case this critical appraisal of the situation should be left for another day.

For now let us see how these rampaging militants held Port Harcourt, the garden city of Rivers state under siege for two weeks. And in the process martyred late Oduayo Awonisi. She truly represents resistance to naked criminality in the region in the name of the struggle. She fought it with her blood even at the tender age of eleven.

Eleven years old Miss Odunayo Awonusi was leading her younger brother, Emmanuel whose age was put at nine to school at about 730 am two Wednesdays ago around Rumuokuta area of Port Harcourt when the brigands struck. They were very close to their destination when suddenly a car pulled in front of them and some heavily armed youths alighted, dishing out orders that they should immediately move into the car. Little Miss Odunayo who apparently suspected that they were kidnappers held on very tightly to her younger brother, shouting that they should be left alone.

Looking confused and also sensing danger because time was running out on them the hoodlums immediately opened fire on the little girl and then disappeared with her kid brother. The Rivers state Police PRO, Mrs. Rita Inoma Abbey, said little Miss Oduayo gave up the ghost at the hospital where she was rushed to by sympathizers.

Mother of the kids reportedly fainted on the spot when she heard what happened to her children. At press time, according to Chairman, Port Harcourt zone of Petroleum and Natural Gas Senior Staff Association, Comrade Evangelist Grace Olowu, the mother of the children was still being treated for shock at a hospital in the state.

Like many others Comrade Grace wondered why the kidnappers were still holding on to the boy after killing his only sister.

She said it took the couple several years after their marriage before they started having children. And this was why they named the girl who was their first child, Oduayo, meaning my year of joy. And when the second child came being a boy, they named him Olamide, meaning my riches have come.

Lamenting the heinous action of the militants, she said they had robbed the family of their joy with the killing of the girl. She passionately appealed to them

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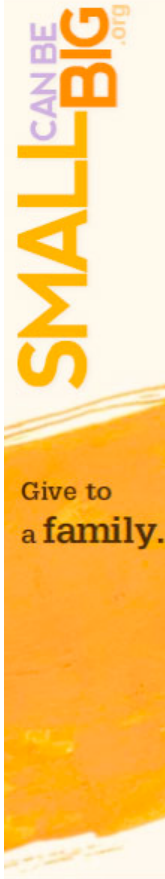
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to release the only child of the family still in their custody unconditionally." If for nothing at least to bring some little smile to the heart of the mourning parents."

Many at the time of this piece still could not fathom why the hoodlums shot at a defenseless little girl. Could it be that she recognized one of them?

This is just one of the many questions agitating the minds. History of abductions in the state is replete with cases of complicity of those close to the family like drivers etc arranging abductions of members of their ogas family for fee. Is it likely this is one of such instances? No answers could be provided at the moment. At the time of this report, no contact had been made with the family or anybody for ransom.

This is even another shocking aspect of the whole incident. Effort by Vanguard to meet with parents of the children for a chat was futile.

The state Police PRO, had told the Vanguard that the family resides at number seven Jesus Close. And when Vanguard visited the house, there was no sign of anybody living there.

A guard in the neighborhood who offered comment said he was not sure if anybody had moved into the storey building. Another source however said the family had been relocated to a safe abode, kept away from the public for their own safety. But "Why did they still go with the other child? So they are expecting ransom. Well we hand them over to their creator. The little Oduayo is indeed a heroin.

She should be celebrated." A resident said in the state capital.

A catholic priest Rev Father Kii also had a dose of what being in the custody of militants is like when he was taken hostage in the state capital pen ultimate Sunday.

He was however released after a few days. Dust generated by these abductions was still on when the peace in Dline, an elite area of Port Harcourt was again shattered by bullets from the militants last Tuesday night at about 9pm.

This time they came for the wife of the amanyanabo of Nembe, in Bayelsa state and former minister of state for petroleum, Edmund Daukoru. The wife, Mrs. Gladys Dakouru was said to be in her drinking spot along Railway close when the militants struck.

They reportedly fired warning shots to ward off any resistance before fleeing with her. Sources said the kidnappers later established contact with Chairman of Bayelsa state peace and conflict resolution committee, Chief James Jephthah demanding the withdrawal of soldiers from the state as the only condition for her release.

Meanwhile, former president of the Ijaw National Congress, Prof Kimse Okoko is among those that have condemned the abduction of Mrs. Dakouru, saying that it was a sad and shameful act. Okoko who called for her immediate release urged those behind the spate of kidnapping in the state and the region to have a rethink as it was beginning to tell very negatively on the region.

"It is getting out of hand. It is very sad. I hope that they release her unhurt. We have to realize that we should stop this wanton kidnapping going on. It is blighting our cause. I feel for the husband and the kids obviously. I appeal for his release", Okoko pleaded

That same night commissioner for works and estate in the Rivers state Independent Electoral Commission (RSIEC), Dr Hilkeya Igoni was taken hostage along Mgbuoba/NTA road. According to spokesman of the commission, Mr. Sam Woka, the commissioner was returning from a church programme when the militants abducted him.

He appealed for his immediate and unconditional release. According to a neighborhood source, the hoodlums disappeared with the commissioner in his Honda Accord car.

A staff of Agip oil firm, Mr. Charles James was kidnapped that same night. He was also returning from a church programme when the hoodlums struck. Sources close to the family said the kidnapers had established contact with the family members and were demanding fifteen million naira. The wife, Mrs. Inara James appealed for the release of her husband, saying they did not have such money. The frequency chart of abduction has risen in the state. Between January to date no fewer than six persons have been taken hostage.

It started with the kidnap of one of Africa's celebrated writers, Captain Elechi Amadi on January 6th

The weeks under review were not all about kidnapping. Leader of Bush boys, a dreaded militant group in the state, Sunny Opuebe aka Commander was also murdered last Sunday night in Port Harcourt. According to sources he was

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killed along Aboloma road by two persons suspected to be members of a rival group.

Sources told the Vanguard that for fear of assassination the late Sunny who has a house in the area was always sneaking out to sleep in a hotel in the area. "The hotel has heavy security. So he was always checking into the place." The sources continued that after the match between Liver Pool and Chelsea that Sunday night which he watched at his residence, he reportedly relocated to the hotel. Minutes after, he allegedly got a call for a meeting at a spot on Aboloma road.

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It was at the meeting that two boys that were fully armed allegedly shot him to death. And then disappeared

Another militant leader in the state told the Vanguard on phone that the Bush Boys which came to be known as Peace Makers traces its root to Okrika. And it came into being around 1999 as a structure set up by some persons in the community to resist Ateke Tom and his group in the community then perceived to be working for the state government.

According to the militant leader who spoke under cover he said Ateke Tom and his group where being used then by the government to harass the community to transform into a PDP area. And also fight other political battles. When the intimidation became too much according to the source some persons who felt bitter with the situation had no choice but to evolve a structure to challenge the might of Ateke Tom and his group.

Meanwhile, like similar structures in the state, this Bush Boys the source said later transformed into a cult like organization with membership spreading to other parts of the state.

The source said at the time of the death of Sunny Opuebe, the rivalry between Ateke's group and the Bush boys was still there. The source also said that the Bush Boys were also not in good terms with the Out laws led by Soboma George

" He is the leader of the Bush Boys. We don't know why he was killed. He has dropped arms. He is not into arms at the moment. So we don't know where the death came from. The Bush Boys is a militant group because they carry arms.

They took off in 1999. They came up to resist Ateke Tom and his domination in Okrika at a time. I understand the rivalry between Ateke Tom's group and the Bush Boys is till there. I also know that they are not in good terms with the Soboma George's group.

Their name changed to Peace Makers at a time, because they made it clear to Okrika community that they came to make peace in the town. Though we don't know where this death came from but our thoughts are pointing at a direction". Sources close to the Bush Boys also added that the structure is an affiliate of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta.

Also head of Green Landers, another local cult group in Okrika who was simply identified as Theophilus was reportedly shot mysteriously.

Also four militant youths were reportedly killed around Alakirki flow stations by rival group. JTF spokesman in the state Lieutenant Col Sagir Musa said the security body had no hand in the death. Community sources feared that the death would have come from their rival body.

NIGERIAN army on its part has described as worrisome the senseless killing of youths and innocent people in the Niger Delta in the name of militancy. Major General Sarki Yarki Bello who spoke

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last Wednesday while handing over as Commander of the II Brigade, Port Harcourt army barracks said he was really bothered by the callous actions of those behind these killings and other related crimes like hostage taking in the region.

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He urged them to give peace a chance so that development could come to the state and the region. According to him, dialogue was a better tool to resolving any situation than resorting to violence and senseless killings.

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