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VANGUARD

Nigeria: Lieutenant, 14 Others Feared Dead in JTF, Militants Clash

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FIFTEEN persons, including seven soldiers, one of them a Lieutenant were feared to have been shot dead in Wednesday's gun battle between militants and men of the Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Niger-Delta at the Chanomi Creeks in Delta State just as militants have hijacked and diverted a tanker, which was chartered by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) to deliver condensate to the Warri Ports.

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An Ijaw community leader, Chief Timothy Ayebra confirmed to Vanguard, yesterday, that eight innocent villagers who were fishing at the time of the crossfire were killed.

He said their corpses were picked up, yesterday. His words "Yesterday's (Wednesday) attack by the JTF left some villagers who were fishing at the time of the incident dead. This resulted from the sporadic shooting of the military men. So far eight corpses have been recovered from the river."

Vanguard confirmed from credible security sources that besides the seven dead soldiers, whose corpses have not been found, no fewer than 10 others were injured.

A JTF source told Vanguard that the soldiers concerned have been declared missing, as it was wrong to proclaim them dead when "we have not seen their corpses."

"What happened was that their gunboat capsized, as they were trying to make a u-turn and they fell into the water, the militants surrounded them and shot directly on them inside the water", he explained.

But Coordinator of the Media Campaign Centre of the JTF, Colonel Rabe Abubakar said when contacted on the death of seven soldiers that he would only confirm that soldiers were injured in the gun battle and not that any of them died.

Told by Vanguard that contrary to the JTF position that only two soldiers were injured, six injured soldiers were taken to the Central Hospital, Warri on Wednesday and later relocated to the Chevron Clinic, he said the two were the critical cases.

The fear that the JTF was planning a reprisal and which has led to tension in the creeks of the state, was, however, debunked by Colonel Abubakar who told Vanguard that there was no such plan.

Security chiefs meet in Abuja

Vanguard gathered authoritatively that security chiefs met in Abuja on Wednesday night over the development in Delta state and while some suggested a military option, others said it would be unwise to take such a step, knowing what happened in Odi and other places that the military invaded.

It was finally agreed at the meeting that a military option should not be used, as the Delta State Government had been able to maintain peace in the state for almost two years now, but, for the recent incident. The security chiefs advised that dialogue should be used so as not to send a wrong signal to the

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international community.

Commander of the task force, Major General Sarki Bello, the land component commander, Brigadier-General Nanven Wuyep Rintip and other senior officials of the JTF were locked in a meeting all through yesterday in Warri.

It was gathered that top officers of the JTF had come to Warri for a meeting on the restructuring of the task force only to be confronted with the latest situation on ground.

A soldier who spoke to Vanguard said, "Some of us have not slept since yesterday (Wednesday), it is not easy, some of our people were killed by militants".

JTF confirms hijack of tanker

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Confirming the hijack of an NNPC chartered tanker, Colonel Abubakar said, "In their bid to continue to perpetrate their criminal activities and to portray the oil rich region as unsafe for viable economic activities, suspected group of militants from Camp 5 led by Tompolo in Delta State, has forcefully hijacked a CM Spirit NNPC chartered tanker while sailing to Warri to discharge some condensate today the 13th of May 2009.

"The tanker was hijacked around Chanomi Creek and the crew and the Captain of the tanker have been taken to unknown location around the Camp 5 area".

Colonel Abubakar stated, "This action by the militants is against the general interest of the public especially in the face of the lingering fuel scarcity. He also said that these ungodly acts are against the tenet of emancipation of the Niger Delta. This is criminality in its entirety which must not be condoned"

Colonel Abubakar added that the fate of the crew members and the Captain was yet to be ascertained, adding, "The JTF Operation Restore Hope is closely monitoring this barbaric conduct of the militants".

Another hijack

He also confirmed the hijack of a cargo ship, which was reported yesterday by Vanguard saying, "In a related development, a cargo Ship was equally hijacked by the same militants at Chanomi Creek; the ship was also sailing to Warri when it was hijacked by the militants from Camp 5."

Sporadic shootings

Meanwhile, there were sporadic shootings in the creeks and Warri waterside, yesterday, by angry soldiers and villagers continued with their mass exodus from areas considered to be targets of soldiers.

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Two persons were shot by stray bullets and were rushed to the Central Hospital, Warri for treatment. Our source said, "The soldiers were just shooting indiscriminately around the area, causing tension among the people".



MEND declares N-Delta "no-fly" zone

MEND also claimed it launched pre-emptive attacks on two marine bases of the Joint Task Force (JTF) on the Niger-Delta in Delta State, in the early hours of yesterday, devastating about five gunboats and other support vessels.

The militant group also yesterday, declared Niger-Delta a "no-fly" zone to helicopters and float planes operating on behalf of oil companies with effect from 0000 hours tomorrow (Saturday) just as it extended the deadline for oil companies to evacuate their facilities from the region by 48 hours.

MEND in a statement signed by its spokesman, Jomo Gbomo, said "at exactly 0200 hours on Thursday, May 14, 2009, special commandos from the militant group launched what it described as "pre-emptive simultaneous attacks on two military Joint Task Force marine bases in Delta state in response to a planned punitive invasion on some protesting oil communities.

"Overall, five gun boats and various support vessels have been destroyed in one night thereby confirming the success of Operation Pearl Harbor.

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imminent hurricane.

"Considering the extension of time plea by some oil companies, we are extending our quit deadline by another 48 hours to enable complete staff evacuation", he stated.

JTF dismisses MEND's claim

JTF however dismissed MEND's claim. In a statement signed by Colonel Abubakar, the Task Force noted, "This is to inform the press that there was no attack on our bases by 0200hrs by militants; therefore, the issue of destroying 5 JTF gunboats should not arise. An attack had to take place before you can begin to talk of what were destroyed or not, as such the statement by MEND or any other group was not only baseless but was unfounded as there is no iota of truth in that shameful and unprovoked false release".

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pls i want the Federal government to come into this matter immediately before it gets out of hand.for example lets consider the souls for instance that are gone for the moment,lots of human souls mean i the innocent citizens of our country been killed all in the name of militants its unfair.my name is dose Pillo Okpowere-Ebi.

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