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14 militants' camps captured, John Togo flees

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By Emma Amaize, Samuel Oyadongha & Emma Arubi

WARRI — THE Joint Task Force, **JTF**, yesterday launched a major offensive on the hideouts of regrouped **militants** in the Niger Delta region, in response to the Federal Government directive, capturing 14 militants' camps even as 'General' John Togo, the wanted leader of the Niger Delta Liberation Force, destroyed his own camp with dynamites and other explosives before fleeing.

The aerial bombardment of the "war zone", according to security sources, began at about 2.00 p.m. with soldiers entering the creeks leading to the battle field, apparently to prevent the **militants** from escaping.

Vanguard gathered that the soldiers renewed the battle following the escape of John Togo during last Wednesday's night raid on his new camp which led to the death of seven soldiers and a mobile policeman with 17 injured.

It was gathered that the casualty figure must have risen on the side of the **militants** as their initial expectation was for the soldiers to confront them in the marshy land which they were familiar with.

As at the time of filing this report, there was heavy gun battle with soldiers said to be having an upper hand and determined to dislodge the **militants** in line with the directive of the Federal Government.

Civilians in the neighbouring communities were said to have fled in droves since Wednesday night while those left behind ran into Ughelli yesterday to escape the gun duel between the soldiers and **militants**.

"We have to run for safety in Ughelli because bullets were flying all over the places in our communities. We want to avoid stray bullets from killing us," a villager said.

It was gathered that more soldiers were also deployed to guard all oil installations as well as military barracks located in the twin cities of Warri and Effurun from an attack from the **militants**.

Heavily armed soldiers mounted security at the JTF Headquarters at Effurun checking movement in and out of the barracks while the Naval Base, Warri was also guarded by

fierce looking naval personnel.

Coordinator, Joint Media Campaign Centre of **JTF**, Lt. Colonel Anthony Antigha confirmed the renewed fight in John Togo's camp, saying they were determined to stamp out gangsterism and militancy in the creeks of the Niger Delta.

JTF won't **attack** innocent people

Spokesman for the **JTF**, Lt Col. T.O. Antigha, has however told residents of the riverside communities to be calm and remain law-abiding as the task force had no plans to **attack** innocent citizens.

He said the mandate of the task force was to destroy militant camps, wherever they have sprung up or were springing up in the region.

No house burnt by **JTF** in Obotobo

Sector Commander of the **JTF**, Warri, Colonel Sarhim had to make a special arrangement for Vanguard on Wednesday to visit the militant camp the task force destroyed the previous day in a hamlet, near Obotobo I, following a claim that the community was razed by soldiers.

Vanguard observed that no single house in the community was torched by soldiers. They only pulled down and burnt the new structures in the militant camp, which had earlier been destroyed by the **JTF**.

The ex-militant leader, Bonigawei who owns the camp, said fishermen were currently using the place that built the new structures to serve as shelter, but the task force said what they saw on ground was an indication of the tortoise returning to his old game.

Camps taken over by **JTF**

Among the camps seized by the special security forces were those operated by one Commander Obez in Rivers State, three in Bayelsa operated by one Keiti Sese popularly known as Commander Nomukeme (mad man) in Foropa enclave of the Southern Ijaw council area of Bayelsa State and another at Igbikiri in Nembe area of Bayelsa State.

Also occupied in Bayelsa by the security forces following voluntary handover witnessed by the Commander of the Sector 2, Col Victor Ezugwu, were camps formerly operated by Ebikabowei Victor_Ben otherwise known as Field Marshal (Boyloaf) and Commander Pastor Wilson Reuben in Ezetu, Ekene and Polama communities of Southern Ijaw council area.

The **JTF**, it was also learnt, are occupying the camp of John Togo and Commander Opuye in Delta State.

Arms recovered

A total of 30,000 rounds of ammunition, dynamites, anti_aircraft rocket launchers, five machine guns and AK 47 were recovered in three separate operations launched in the three states.

The occupation of the camps by the security forces, it was learnt, was to prevent hoodlums from using the abandoned camps as base to carry out their nefarious activities.

In the Rivers and Bayelsa operations, the Commander of the Joint Task Force, Major General Charles Omoregie said there were no violent confrontations between the soldiers and the **militants**.

“There were no significant resistance and when the **militants** saw that **attack** was imminent, they extended an olive branch to the **JTF**,” the commander who spoke on phone said.

He described the current campaign as multi dimensional and not a few days operation which involved the continued patrol of the creeks to dissuade the return of the criminals identified among the **militants**.

He said those willing to give up their arms and collaborate with the Federal Government would be allowed to do so after they have been quizzed by the police just as he announced the arrest of six persons including an alleged cult kingpin in Southern Ijaw identified as Commander Dan over their alleged involvement in the **attack** on Nigerian Agip Oil Company, NAOC, facilities at Gbarain and Likogbene areas of Bayelsa.

'General' John Togo flees

Wanted leader of the Niger_Delta Liberation Force, NDLF, a militant group in Delta State, “General” John Togo, whose fighters, Wednesday, engaged men of the Joint Task Force, **JTF**, on the Niger_Delta in a six_hour gun battle, and stalled an attempt by the task force to overrun his camp, yesterday destroyed his own camp with dynamites and other explosives before fleeing.

He, thereafter, relocated with his fighters and armoury to another hideout in the creeks just as the Commander of **JTF**, Major-General Charles Omoregie was strategizing with his men, yesterday, on how to capture him.

The Sector Commander, **JTF**, Warri, Colonel Jamil Sarhim who cordoned off major escape routes on the waterways between Bomadi and **Burutu** local government areas after Wednesday's gun battle in preparation for the next offensive was said to be among the officers at the tactical meeting.

Community declares Togo an outlaw

Meanwhile, the people of Ogodobiri community in Bomadi Local Government Area of Delta State, hometown of John Togo, yesterday, declared him an outlaw and cautioned him not to step his foot on the community again.

Chairman of Ogodobiri community, Mr. Terry Youdowei, told Vanguard, yesterday: “John Togo is not from Ogodobiri community, it's his mother that is from our community, he is from Ayakuromoh community in **Burutu** local government area, about 100 kilometres away, but because of him, soldiers came to destroy our community in 2004.

We don't want that to happen again. We heard that the **JTF** is preparing to **attack** communities again because of John Togo.

“It is true he used to have a camp here, but he had since gone to open a new camp in

Burutu. We don't know him in Ogodobiri, he is not from our community, he is an outlaw as far as we are concerned and **JTF** should not **attack** us because of him again," he said.

The community leader said there was nothing wrong in the Federal Government arresting him.

A councillor in Bomadi Local Government Area, Geoffrey Didofa, who led some leaders of the community to intimate the Ijaw national leader, Chief Edwin Clark, about their worries, yesterday, told Vanguard in Warri: "We don't want what happened on June 11, 2004 to happen to us again, that is why we went to meet Chief Clark to tell him what we heard, that the **JTF** wants to **attack** us because of John Togo and we are saying that John Togo is not from Ogodobiri, they should arrest him but don't **attack** us."

President of the Ogodobiri Community Concerned Forum, Pastor Felix Okpe said: "The militant camp set up by John Togo is far away from Ogodobiri community. We will hand him over to the security agencies if he dares to enter this community in any manner to seek refuge."

Another Ogodobiri indigene, Mr Gabriel Yabaku, told Vanguard on phone: "Ogodobiri is a peaceful fishing and farming community, about 60_100 kilometres away from where John Togo set up his militant camp. We appeal to the **JTF** not to **attack** our community, we don't want to experience what we experienced in the past. Our community has declared him an outlaw and if we see him, we will ensure that he faces the law."

Yabaku said the militant leader had been known to be a very bad person but when he came back recently and said he had accepted amnesty, and set up a farm in his area, people thought he had changed, only to convert the farm to a militant camp.

Why we bombed our camp – NDLF spokesman

Spokesman for the militant group, "Captain" Mark Anthony who confirmed to Vanguard at about 1.00 pm, yesterday, that the militant camp was blown up by **militants** themselves said: "As I am speaking to you now, our militant camp is on fire, our leader, General Togo ordered that the camp be blown up with explosives because we got information that the **JTF** was coming to **attack** Ijaw communities in the area under the guise of raiding our camp. We don't want them to make innocent villagers their victims.

"The camp is just one block of building, our fighters are detonating bombs to destroy it by themselves. The **JTF** should not say that they destroyed our camp, we destroyed it by ourselves, It is one of our camps and we are relocating to another camp. That is not to say that we are running, we are only relocating because of the danger our continued stay in the place would pose to market women, children and other residents in the surrounding communities if the **JTF** comes. We will give **JTF** our new address."

Our grouse with FG

According to him, "our grouse, however, is not with the **JTF**; it is with the Federal Government and the way it is running the post-amnesty programme. President Goodluck Jonathan should reconvene a meeting of all ex-militant leaders to discuss the post-amnesty programme and agree on the way forward, we are not militants, we are freedom fighters."