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3 soldiers feared dead, militants bomb NNPC gas pipeline as Buhari directs army to deal with Niger Delta Avengers

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- *Buhari orders Navy to crush militancy in Niger Delta
- *Otuaro, Delta Dep Gov, Chevron confer on how to stop bombings
- *Community spiritual head tells govt to expect 'worse things'

By Emma Amaize, Samuel Oyadongha, Livinus Nwabughio, Egufe Yafugborhi and Perez Brisibe

ABOUT three soldiers attached to the Joint Task Force, JTF, in the Niger Delta, allegedly perished in two detached boat tragedies in Bayelsa and Delta States, while suspected militants again bombed the Escravos Gas

Pipeline, a facility of the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation, NNPC, in Delta State, at the weekend. Details were still hazy at press time, but Saturday Vanguard learned that the fresh explosion occurred near a military houseboat around Ogbe-Ijoh, headquarters of Warri South-West local government area.

This was as President Mohammadu Buhari was directing the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral Ibok-Eke Ekwe Ibas to deal ruthlessly with the militants who destroy pipelines.

On the latest incident in Niger Delta, the Deputy Governor of Delta State and Chairman, Delta State Advocacy Committee against Pipeline Vandalism, Barrister Kingsley Burutu Otuario, whose committee is still in the creeks, carrying out enlightenment, told our reporter on phone: “We are not very sure of what happened, but we suspect it was rupture on the pipeline.”

“However, the committee has put structures on ground to be able to arrest this kind of situation and we believe that we will be able to fish out the perpetrators if it is a case of sabotage in due course. We have reached out to traditional rulers, community leaders and youths and everybody is working chase pipeline vandals away from the state,” he said.

On how a soldier died in Bayelsa state, a community source said: “One of the soldiers escorting oil workers from an oil spill site drowned at Taylor Creek, near an oilfield operated by Nigerian Agip Oil Company, NAOC in Okordia, Yenagoa local government area, Bayelsa, while the other two drowned when their gunboat capsized.”

“The boat conveying the crew from Agip’s field capsized on their way back

from the site at the oilfield across and before help could come, the soldier drowned and died, they were using a hand- paddled canoe to cross the workers one at a time.



“The soldier was washing his boots when water entered that boat and it capsized and his rifle fell into the water. The other members of the crew had crossed and waiting for him to cross,” the source added. According to him, “The attention of the fishermen operating along the creek was drawn to the distressed soldier and canoe driver of the ill- fated boat and they came and were only able to rescue the boat driver.

Saturday Vanguard gathered that officials of NAOC, National Oil Spills Detection and Response Agency, NOSDRA, Ministries of Environment (State and Federal), Department of Petroleum Resources, DPR, and oil workers were returning from a post clean-up inspection, PCI, when the incident occurred on Thursday evening. Youth President Kalaba community, Okordia, Mr Samuel Oburo, said that local divers recovered the rifle of the dead soldier on Friday.

“Some soldiers from Elele Barracks came around after the remains of the soldier was recovered and asked me to mobilize local divers in search of the rifle of the soldier. “We went in search of the gun and we recovered the rifle and handed it over to them, later in the day, another senior officer came to show appreciation to the community,” Oburo said.

An eyewitness who corroborated the story, said: “The tragic incident occurred at about 1.30 pm, it was not an attack by militants. The Taylor

Creek traverses JK4, Betterland, Ikarama and Kalaba communities in Rivers and Bayelsa states. He said: “A total of five soldiers and three police officers were said to have accompanied the team on post clean-up inspection of the area. The team had concluded its mission in the forest and was returning to the community en route Port Harcourt when tragedy occurred.”

His words: “The first two canoes successfully crossed the creek when the third canoe ferrying the soldier lost its balance as the soldier was washing his muddy boots in the water while crossing. This caused the canoe to wave; he got frightened and jumped into the creek.” “One of our boys tried to rescue him, but the struggle was much and in the process, he drowned. By the time we succeeded in dragging him out, it was too late,” the eyewitness added.

Speaking on the two soldiers believed to have died in Delta state, a security source who preferred anonymity, said: “A military gunboat had an accident in the early hours of this morning (yesterday) around Akpala, near Odidi, Warri South-West local government area of Delta state. I do not know if any soldier died but the boat was carrying soldiers.”

Regarding the gas pipeline explosion on Friday, a villager at Ogbe-Ijoh community told Saturday Vanguard: “The blast shook our houses, it was in the night, close to where soldiers have their house boat and I wonder what they were doing since they were supposed to guarding the pipelines.”

“This one happened outside Gbaramatu clan; we heard the explosion in our homes and residents residing in communities around the Warri water front, Warri South local government area also felt the impact. “But I think it is Escravos Gas Pipeline that they attacked again around Beneth Island,” he added. . Spokesperson of the Joint Task Force, Col Isa Ado, was unavailable

for comment. However, a security source confirmed the incident, said they deposited the remains of a soldier at an undisclosed hospital.

At, Ekowe community in Southern Ijaw local government area of Bayelsa state, unknown gunmen invaded the home of the traditional head, Chief Togboro Godwill. According to community sources, the royal father was not at home when the gunmen struck, but his wife and newborn baby narrowly escaped death. The gunmen stormed the riverside community, host to a Federal Polytechnic, at about 3.00 am in a 200 horse powered Yamaha engine speedboat. They reportedly vandalized the residence.

Police Public Relations Officer, Bayelsa State Police Command, Asinim Butswat, said he was not aware of the incident.

Pipeline explosion: **Buhari directs Chief of Naval Staff to deal with Niger Delta Avengers**

In Abuja, President Mohammadu Buhari was on Friday directing the Chief of Naval Staff, Rear Admiral Ibok-Ete Ekwe Ibas to deal ruthlessly with the Niger Delta Avengers, NDA and other militant groups responsible for the incessant explosion of oil pipelines and gas installations in the coastal region.

The president stated that his government has decided to curb the increasing wave of militancy more than ever before, saying that it threatens national development. The president spoke at a meeting with the Global Director (Upstream) of the Royal Dutch Shell Group, Mr. Andrew Brown in his office at the presidential Villa, Abuja. Mr. Brown had appealed for an urgent solution to rising crime and militancy in the Niger Delta.

In a response to the appeal, President detailed Naval Chief to reorganise and strengthen the military Joint Task Force (JTF) in the Niger Delta for the assignment, assuring the oil companies operating in the Niger Delta of Federal Government protection. He said that all necessary actions would have to be taken to protect strategic assets in the region from vandals and criminals.

The President further told his visitor that the operations of the JTF were also being enhanced by increased support and cooperation from the United States and Europe in the areas of training, intelligence, equipment and logistics. "We have to be very serious with the situation in the Niger Delta because it threatens the national economy. I assure you that everything possible will be done to protect personnel and oil assets in the region," he said.

A statement by Mallam Shehu, the presidential media aide stated that "the President urged aggrieved persons, militants and communities in the Niger Delta to drop their confrontational stance and work with those who have been charged by the Federal Government to review the Amnesty Programme initiated by the Yar'Adua Administration for the benefit of all parties."

President Buhari also hailed the resilience of Shell and its resolve to continue working in Nigeria despite the operational challenges of the environment. He however urged the company ensure the end of gas-flaring in the Niger Delta quickly and produce more gas for electricity generation to support manufacturing and job creation in the country.

Meanwhile, the Shell Executive has dispelled speculations that the company was pulling out of Nigeria. He said that contrary to such

speculations, Shell was currently in discussion with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) on new joint oil and gas projects.

Otuaro, Chevron confer on how to stop bombings

Meanwhile, Delta State Deputy Governor and Chairman, Delta State Advocacy Committee against Vandalism of Oil Installations, Barrister Kingsley Burutu Otuaro, held a closed-door meeting with top officials of Chevron Nigeria Limited, CNL, at Warri, Friday, to discuss the bombings of oil installations in the state by militants and deepen intelligence on the perpetrators.

The meeting with Chevron was at its Ecravos Operations base. Otuaro told the press after the meeting: “We have just heard from Chevron. We are deepening intelligence to know who is directly and indirectly involved. His words: “We are deepening intelligence to know the remote and immediate causes. At the end of the day, we will be well positioned to advice as to what possible steps to take in addition to the intelligence they have gathered.”

The committee, which inspected ongoing work at the Otunana pipeline bombed by militants, also visited Chevron facilities in the creeks, Ugborodo and other riverine communities, yesterday.

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