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More Violence Hits Nigeria's Oil Delta

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) -- Nigerian troops on Tuesday attacked four villages suspected of harboring ethnic militants involved in fighting that has crippled multinational oil operations, witnesses said.

Army spokesman Col. Chukwuemeka Onwuamaegbu denied responsibility for the attacks, blaming violence on Ijaws and Itsekiri fighters.

At least 100 people have been reported killed since March 12, when ethnic fighting between Ijaw and Itsekiris drew in the army.

Boatloads of soldiers fired at the swampy Niger Delta villages of Oburu-Gbene, Pepe-Ama, Teiteipo and Feitorubo, witnesses said.

Casualty reports from the remote region were incomplete. Eighteen people were killed in Pepe-Ama, said John Pebemimigo, a resident who said he saw eight of the bodies.

Nigeria's military has repeatedly denied targeting civilians, yet warns it reserves the right to use military strikes against Ijaw activists accused of ambushing military patrols.

Thousands of army, navy and police reinforcements into the Niger delta's have been rushed to the warren of marshes and creeks, including three navy frigates full of troops on Monday. Onwuamaegbu said the latest deployments would be used to protect oil facilities.

Ijaws, the largest ethnic group in the delta, have seized 11 oil pipeline stations and threatened to blow them up unless President Olusegun Obasanjo's government redraws voting boundaries currently seen as favoring the minority Itsekiris.

Oil giant ChevronTexaco has nearly halted its operations, while Shell and TotalFinaElf have seriously curtailed production. Nigeria is the world's sixth largest exporter and fifth biggest source of U.S. oil imports.

Oil companies have evacuated thousands of residents by helicopter and plane, mainly Itsekiris living close to their facilities. Thousands more have fled in dugout canoes, braving a 24-hour shoot-on-sight military curfew in the region's waterways.

Residents fleeing the area fear a repeat of military massacres in 1999 and 2001 that left hundreds of unarmed villagers dead. In both cases, Nigerian soldiers were retaliating for attacks on security force troops.

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