

March 24, 2003

## **ChevronTexaco Shuts Facilities in Nigeria Delta**

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAGOS, Nigeria, March 23 (AP) — ChevronTexaco evacuated staff members and shut down most of its installations in Nigeria today after weeks of fighting between ethnic militants and government forces that has killed scores of people.

The development came as the militants' leaders accused the Nigerian Army of attacking the Niger Delta village of Okpelama, near the huge company's main Escravos oil export terminal.

Ethnic militants have threatened to blow up 11 multinational oil installations that they claimed to have captured in retaliation for government military raids.

The Ijaws, with eight million people the largest ethnic group in the delta, have long accused President Olusegun Obasanjo of colluding with the minority Itsekiri to draw up unfavorable voting boundaries before the elections in April.

In a communiqué, Jay Pryor, chairman and managing director of ChevronTexaco's Nigerian subsidiary, said the company was evacuating its remaining workers from the Escravos terminal and offshore rigs "to protect them from harm."

"The safety of people is our absolute priority," Mr. Pryor said. The company earlier had evacuated most of its staff members at onshore oil sites.

Battles between rival militants from the Ijaw and Itsekiri groups have drawn a huge response from the armed forces. Villagers accuse the military of indiscriminately pouring gunfire into their towns, killing and injuring residents and causing others to flee their homes.

"The army opened fire on the community, killing a still-unknown number of people," said Bello Oboko, president of the militant Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities. "Everyone else fled into the bush."

Soldiers "have blocked all the major waterways, disrupted livelihoods and destroyed our villages," he added.

An army spokesman, Chukwuemeka Onwuamaegbu, denied the allegations.

The fighting already has cut multinational oil exports by 350,000 barrels a day — about one-sixth of Nigeria's total production of two million barrels a day. Nigeria is the fifth-largest supplier of petroleum products to the United States.

Earlier Sunday, navy sailors intercepted a boat carrying 17 suspected militants on a river near ChevronTexaco's Escravos facilities, Mr. Onwuamaegbu said. The men were suspected of capturing and threatening to destroy oil installations. Soldiers found an automatic rifle and live ammunition in the boat, he added.

"We're handing them over to the police to investigate," Mr. Onwuamaegbu said.

Mr. Oboko, the Ijaw leader, said he was unaware of the arrests.

He repeated his group's earlier threat to blow up the ChevronTexaco, Royal/Dutch Shell and TotalFinaElf oil facilities that they occupied if the military raids continued and the government ignores calls for electoral reforms ahead of late-April elections.

Ijaw leaders said they were meeting today in the oil city of Port Harcourt to plan further antigovernment actions.