

## **Nigerian Militants Warn of Attacks**

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**By Robyn Dixon**

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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — Nigeria's volatile Niger Delta is unlikely to see a reduction in violence, despite Monday's release of four kidnapped foreign oil contractors, analysts say.

The swampy, oil-rich region is notorious for its violence, political corruption, large-scale oil theft and kidnappings, and the international price of oil sometimes soars in response to the rhetoric of militant leaders.

Militants released the four after holding them nearly three weeks, but immediately threatened new attacks and warned foreign oil workers to leave.

An e-mail statement to news agencies said the rebel group would carry out "significant" new attacks to cut Nigeria's oil exports by 30%.

"The release does not signify a cease-fire or softening of our position to destroy the oil export capability of the Nigerian government," a Reuters account of the statement said.

Nigeria supplies about 10% of U.S. oil, and its growth as a supplier depends on its ability to contain the mayhem in the delta. Analysts predict that the region's problems will surge as 2007 elections approach.

The four freed hostages, American sea captain Patrick Landry, British security expert Nigel Watson-Clark and engineers Milko Nichev of Bulgaria and Harry Ebanks of Honduras were kidnapped Jan. 11 when heavily armed militants in speedboats ambushed their oil industry supply vessel, skippered by Landry.

They were whisked into the grassy swamps of the delta, where militants hold sway and security forces seldom venture.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta claimed responsibility and demanded that the government release two local ethnic Ijaw leaders, and that the region's biggest producer, Royal Dutch Shell, pay \$1.5 billion to local communities affected by oil spills.

No money was paid, nor were any militants released, government officials said.

Analysts often link some militias to corrupt government officials. But most suggest that resentment over the lack of any local benefit from the millions of dollars in oil exports

fuels the violence.

Major attacks have increased in recent weeks, including a raid on the Port Harcourt headquarters of Italian oil firm Agip, which left nine people dead. Armed men also stormed the headquarters of a South Korean oil services company Sunday and made off with more than \$300,000.

Shell has withdrawn hundreds of workers, and regional production has dropped an estimated 10% because of attacks on its facilities.

Michael Peel, West Africa analyst for London-based think tank Chatham House, said it would be a grave mistake for the Nigerian and Western governments and oil companies to see the crisis as resolved with the release of the hostages.

"That's precisely the attitude that has allowed the situation to slide and deteriorate to the dreadful state it is today," he said. "Living conditions for most people in the Niger Delta are appalling."

Peel said violence before the 2003 elections left dozens of people dead and shut down a third of the nation's oil production. Proceeds from oil theft may have been used as payoffs to help rig elections, he said.

Ekiyor Welson, a spokesman for the government of Bayelsa state, said in a telephone interview that the oil workers were freed after intense negotiations involving leaders of the Ijaw community. Three Ijaw intermediaries delivered the men to state government officials about 5 a.m., after which they were flown to Abuja, the capital, to meet with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Steve Dick, executive vice president of Tidewater, the Louisiana company that employs Landry, said in a telephone interview from London that the men had been flown to Lagos after the meeting and would be flown home as soon as possible.

"They're all in good spirits and anxious to get home," he said. "I know they spoke to their families, all four of them."

He said the violence and instability in the delta remained major concerns to the industry. "It's a very volatile area, there's no doubt about that. The Nigerian government has got a real problem, and they're going to have to address it."