

Four U.S. oil workers kidnapped in Nigeria

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Source: Reuters

By Tom Ashby

LAGOS, May 9 (Reuters) - Gunmen kidnapped four American oil workers from a barge off the Nigerian coast on Wednesday in the 10th attack on Western oil facilities in nine days in the Niger Delta, home to Africa's biggest oil industry.

Unrest in the delta has already curbed output by almost a third after some militants stepped up attacks to make clear they were unimpressed by a change in government on May 29 following disputed elections.

The election of a state governor from the delta as vice president has not diluted their anger. Other militants may be taking advantage of a reduction in security after the polls to resume their criminal pursuits, analysts say.

"The Global Cheyenne, a construction barge working in the Okan field, was attacked by unknown armed persons in speed boats," U.S. oil company Chevron <CVX.N> said in a statement.

"Four expatriate American hostages were taken from the vessel and some government security forces suffered injuries during the attack."

No group has claimed responsibility for the latest attack in the world's eighth largest oil exporter which helped push London Brent crude oil futures near \$66 a barrel on Wednesday morning. Prices eased later.

About 100 foreigners have been abducted this year but most were released after their employers illegally paid ransoms. The kidnapping of the Americans takes the total number of foreigners now in captivity to 13.

The barge, operated by U.S. contractor Global Industries <GLBL.O>, was laying pipelines for the U.S. giant and oil supplies were unaffected.

Chevron is facing another crisis at a nearby oilfield which was occupied on Monday by villagers demanding oil spill compensation, halting output of 42,000 barrels per day (bpd).

On Tuesday, rebels blew up three oil pipelines near the nearby Brass terminal, forcing Italian oil firm Eni <ENI.NI> to reduce output by 98,000 bpd and issue a legal notice to default on oil sales, the company said.

An Eni source had previously said all output from Brass, estimated at 150,000 bpd, was halted.

EMBARRASS OBASANJO

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said it bombed the pipelines to embarrass President Olusegun Obasanjo in his last days in office. The group denied responsibility for the kidnapping of the Americans.

The MEND's 18-month campaign of attacks has forced the closure of almost a third of Nigerian oil capacity. It has threatened to launch more raids before Obasanjo hands over to president-elect Umaru Yar'Adua on May 29.

International observers said widespread fraud in last month's elections meant the results were not credible.

Energy Minister Edmund Daukoru said he expected the violence to subside after Yar'Adua's inauguration.

"There is some unfinished business in the Niger Delta. This is simply a signal, not the start of something that will be sustained," he told Reuters in London.

Yar'Adua picked Goodluck Jonathan, the governor of Bayelsa State in the delta, as his running mate in an bid to ease tensions in the region. MEND has dismissed this overture. "Jonathan's selection as vice-president of Nigeria is of no consequence to us unless it is accompanied by a fulfilment of all conditions we have previously given," MEND's spokesman, who uses the pseudonym Jomo Gbomo, said in an e-mail last week.

The MEND says it is fighting for regional control over the delta's oil wealth but the majority of kidnappings are carried out by criminal gangs seeking cash.

The MEND has told oil workers to leave the region and vowed to bring Nigerian exports to a halt to press its case for more autonomy from the central government. It also wants the release of two jailed leaders from the delta and \$1.5 billion in compensation to villages for decades of oil spills. (additional reporting by Milan bureau and Alex Lawler in London)