

Nigerian rebels threaten FIFA junior World Cup

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Attacks on Chevron oil installations continue

LAGOS (AFP) — Rebels in Nigeria's restive Niger Delta on Monday claimed more attacks against facilities run by US oil giant Chevron and warned FIFA against letting Nigeria host the under-17 World Cup tournament.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) also threatened to extend its operations to other states in the oil-rich region.

The MEND statement said they had started a massive fire that destroyed the Abiteye flow station and blew up two other Chevron facilities there early Monday.

Chevron, which has recently confirmed several incidents at its facilities in the area, was not available for comment.

MEND likened its latest operations to a hurricane, and said it would be extending its actions beyond Delta state.

It would move "into the neighboring states of Bayelsa and Rivers before passing through the remaining states of Ondo, Edo, and Akwa Ibom then finally head off-shore," said MEND.

The armed group has threatened before to strike outside the Niger Delta, where numerous foreign oil companies operate, but it has never done so.

MEND went on: "We will want to use this opportunity to advise FIFA to have a re-think about Nigeria hosting the under-17 World Cup tournament at this time, as the safety of international players and visitors cannot be guaranteed due to the current unrest."

The tournament is due to run from October 24 to November 15, and Nigeria has scheduled some of the matches to be played in the southern Niger Delta region.

The statement also called on people from the Niger Delta region living in the north of the country to return home within the next eight weeks.

MEND said it was issuing the warning "because a major event will occur in that part of the country and reprisal attacks directed at them cannot be ruled out."

It gave the same advice to northern Nigerians living in the Niger Delta.

While the north of Nigeria is predominantly Muslim, the south is mainly Christian.

Monday's operations were the latest in a series of MEND attacks on Niger Delta facilities run by the US oil giant designed to demonstrate that a recent government crackdown in the region has had no effect on its ability to operate.

One attack alone in May cost Chevron 100,000 barrels a day in lost production.

On June 7, the rebel group declared the start of an "oil war" after several weeks of clashes with the army.

MEND, which says it wants a fairer distribution of oil wealth to local people, said it would keep up its operations until oil production in the country had been brought to a halt.

"We hope that by the time the oil and gas exports come to zero, Nigeria will maintain those positions from the export of groundnut oil," it said.

Since 2006, MEND had been sabotaging the oil industry infrastructure and abducting oil workers, to the extent that it has seriously disrupted Nigeria's oil production.

Overall the unrest has caused oil production -- Nigeria's main export -- to fall by nearly a third, from 2.6 million barrels a day in 2006 to 1.8 million currently.

Nigeria gets 90 percent of its foreign currency from its production in the Niger Delta region, according to figures from the International Energy Agency.

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