

Anglican Archbishop Kidnapped in Southern Nigeria

✖ Gunmen are still holding the Anglican archbishop of Benin diocese in southern Nigeria's Edo state after abducting him on Sunday.

Peter Imasuen, who is also the state chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), was abducted in front of his official residence on his way back from a church service. The kidnappers are reportedly demanding \$750,000 for his release.

The armed kidnappers reportedly followed the archbishop from the St. Matthew Cathedral to his residence, where they dragged him out of his car and took him to an unknown location.

Executive members of CAN led by the Rev. Richard Ofere met with Edo Gov. Adams Oshiomhole yesterday on the abduction of the bishop; they declined to speak to news media but are believed to be working with family members and government officials on the matter.

Gov. Oshiomhole decried the kidnapping, which he blamed on the federal government's withdrawal of soldiers from a state joint security program code-named, "Operation Thunderstorm" designed to help thwart militant violence and kidnappers.

He promised to meet officials of the president's office on the need to increase security in the state and ensure that the bishop is released soon. Muslim President Umaru Yar'Adua left the country on Nov. 23 to seek treatment in Saudi Arabia, leading some to speculate on a leadership vacuum in the country.

"I feel I have failed as a governor to protect the lives of our people, but whatever we have to do will be done," Gov. Oshiomhole said. "I have sent for all those who should know that everybody must do what needs to be done. We can never

surrender to criminals.”

The identity of the kidnappers was not clear, but in recent years abducting top public figures for ransom has become common in the South-South and South- Eastern zones of the country, where militant groups have been campaigning against the poor level of development of the area.

Armed groups seeking a larger share of oil revenues for local residents have attacked oil installations in southern Nigeria since 2006. One major group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), declared an open-ended ceasefire last October.

The cease-fire was meant to open the way for talk with authorities, but MEND recently said it was “reviewing its indefinite ceasefire announced on Sunday, Oct. 9, 2009, and will announce its position on or before Jan. 30, 2010.”

In the past four years, hundreds of foreign and local oil workers have been kidnapped in the region, with many being released unharmed after hefty ransom payments.

The militants have also blown up pipelines and offshore oil platforms.