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Talent: just a stone's throw away

Story and photos by
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Starting the evening with a heart-felt rendition of the National Anthem, Master Sgt. John Dowd with Regimental Headquarters Headquarters Troop, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, takes the stage at the Remembering 9/11 Talent Show held at the Morale, Welfare and Recreation building on Forward Operating Base Marez.

Talent from Forward Operating Base Marez and Logistical Support Area Diamondback gathered to croon their favorite tunes, dance to their own beats, and woo the audience by plucking away at guitars and basses, tickling the faux-ivory keyboards and letting loose behind their drum sets.

Dubbed the Remembering 9/11 Talent Show, Soldiers and civilians alike gave it their all at the Morale, Welfare and Recreation building located on FOB Marez.

"We try to have a talent show every three months," said MWR technician Michele Bacon who helped organize the event. "We have one at the beginning when the new units come in, the middle and near the end."

One of the many participants who took the stage was Sikeston, Mo. native, Pfc. Shane A. Snow with Forward Support Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. Rapping since the age of 16, Snow perfected his onstage performance by performing as often as he can.

"I go to as many rehearsals as I can," he said, adding that this is his second time performing at a MWR talent show. During the talent show, Snow, along with his backup rapper, Junction City, Kan. native, Pfc. Michael C. Lesher with Company E, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division rapped a song Snow wrote for his mother titled, "Did Your Best." Snow stated the inspiration came from how his mom made sacrifices for his sisters and him during their childhood.

From rapping personal lyrics to crooning age-old classics, the talent show had it all.

Singing "Always and Forever" by Heatwave, Master Sgt. John F. Dowd knew how to work the crowd. As the oldest performer at the show, Dowd, a young 51-year-old, has been singing for more than four decades.

"Even though the generation gap is far apart, everyone can relate to this song," Dowd said.

Four judges from 552nd Military Police Company sat just feet from the stage. The 552nd MP Company was just one of the show's co-sponsors. The judges kept a close eye on all the performances. They scrutinized each act on paper in order to name the top three performances at the end of the show.

"They needed to show talent, attitude and effort," said Capt. Sam Choi, one of the show's judges. "There was definitely a competitive spirit."

"It's a good way to boost their morale," Bacon continued. "The talent

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Gen. Petraeus visits COB Speicher

(RIGHT) Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, 1st Armored Division and Task Force Iron commanding general, presents Gen. David Petraeus, Multi-National Force – Iraq commanding general, with a gift of appreciation during his visit to Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. There, Petraeus spoke with Soldiers and awarded some of them with his prestigious coin.

(LEFT) Multi-National Force – Iraq commanding general, Gen. David Petraeus, spoke to a crowd of Soldiers at Division Main at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. During his visit, he awarded some Soldiers with his prestigious coin, and in return, Maj. Gen. Mark Hertling, Task Force Iron commanding general, presented him with a gift of appreciation.

(RIGHT) Gen. David Petraeus, Multi-National-Force – Iraq commanding general, awards Spc. Aislinn Amig, 18th Engineer Brigade, with his coin during a visit to the Division Main at Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. Amig received his coin because she is the 'go-to' S-1 Soldier in her unit, tracking reports and leave, processing Red Cross messages and maintaining the awards tracker.

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HEADQUARTERS
MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE – IRAQ
BAGHDAD, IRAQ
APO AE 09342-1400

15 September 2008

Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Civilians of Multi-National Force–Iraq:

It has been the greatest of privileges to have been your commander for the past 19 months. During that time, we and our civilian and Iraqi partners have been engaged in an exceedingly complex, difficult, and important task. And in the face of numerous challenges, we and our partners have helped bring new hope to a country that was besieged by extremists and engulfed in sectarian violence.

When I took command of Multi-National Force-Iraq in February 2007, I noted that the situation in Iraq was hard but not hopeless. You have proven that assessment to be correct. Indeed, your great work, sacrifice, courage, and skill have helped to reverse a downward spiral toward civil war and to wrest the initiative from the enemies of the new Iraq.

Together, Iraqi and Coalition Forces have faced determined, adaptable, and barbaric enemies. You and our Iraqi partners have taken the fight to them, and you have taken away their sanctuaries and safe havens. You have helped secure the Iraqi people and have enabled, and capitalized on, their rejection of extremism. You have also supported the Iraqi Security Forces as they have grown in number and capability and as they have increasingly shouldered more of the responsibility for security in their country.

You have not just secured the Iraqi people, you have served them, as well. By helping establish local governance, supporting reconstruction efforts, assisting with revitalization of local businesses, fostering local reconciliation, and conducting a host of other non-kinetic activities, you have contributed significantly to the communities in which you have operated. Indeed, you have been builders and diplomats as well as guardians and warriors.

The progress achieved has been hard-earned. There have been many tough days along the way, and we have suffered tragic losses. Indeed, nothing in Iraq has been anything but hard. But you have been more than equal to every task.

Your accomplishments have, in fact, been the stuff of history. Each of you should be proud of what has been achieved and of the contributions you continue to make. Although our tasks in Iraq are far from complete and hard work and tough fights lie ahead, you have helped bring about remarkable improvements.

Your new commander is precisely the right man for the job. General Ray Odierno played a central role in the progress achieved during the surge. He brings tremendous skill, experience, and understanding as he returns to Iraq for a third tour and takes the helm of MNF-I just seven months after relinquishing command of Multi-National Corps-Iraq. I have total confidence in him, and I will do all that I can as the commander of Central Command to help him, MNF-I, and our Iraqi partners to achieve the important goals that we all share for the new Iraq.

Thank you for your magnificent work here in the "Land of the Two Rivers." And thank you for your sacrifices—and for those of your families—during this crucial phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I am honored to have soldiered with you in this critical endeavor.

With great respect and all best wishes,

Thank you!

David H. Petraeus

David H. Petraeus
General, United States Army
Commanding

Working the stage, Spc. David Michaels with Headquarters Headquarters Troop, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment croons an old classic tune for his audience during a talent show. At the Remembering 9/11 Talent Show, Soldiers and civilians alike gave it their all at the Morale, Welfare and Recreation building located on Forward Operating Base Marez.

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show is a good way for the Soldiers to have something to look forward to and something to do out here in theater."

The show's other sponsor, The Exchange New Car Sales, donated $225 prize money for the top performers, Bacon said.

After nearly 20 acts, the judges deliberated on each act to decide the top four.

Claiming the first place title was a civilian rock group, Pondwater Monk, who performed "Rockin' Out." 2nd place went to Sgt. 1st Class Nijel A. Rawlins on the saxophone, 3rd was captured by 1st Lt. Jermaine Goodman behind the piano and 4th went to Snow and Lesher.

"I come for the entertainment," said Sgt. 1st Class Sherise N. Bell, a spectator with Regimental Headquarters Headquarters Troop, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment. "The top three were definitely my favorites."

"We love the fact that they have somewhere to go to decompress after a long day at work," Bacon said. It's a good way "for the ones who go outside the wire, to forget about what they deal with out there."

Run in Remembrance

Story and photo by
Staff Sgt. Kyle J. Richardson
11th Public Affairs Detachment

Seven years ago, Americans stood side by side, distraught and weary, fighting through the heat, debris and wreckage for hope and the faintest possibilities of finding life.

The unimaginable happened; the eyes of all Americans were ruthlessly opened and the United States was forever changed by the events of September 11, 2001.

Seven years later, Americans stood together once again, however, this time it was to pay tribute to those who were lost during the tragic events that befell the U.S.

The staff of the Morale, Welfare and Recreation office sponsored a 4-mile remembrance run outside of the main fitness center on Forward Operating Base Marez in Mosul, Iraq, Sept. 11.

"We wanted to do something unique to honor those who lost their lives during 9-11," said David Leroy Culley, the lead MWR technician. "It's such a date that impacted history, our lives, everything we ever knew changed on that day. The security was no longer there as we thought. It was a very important day in history and we'll never forget it and we shouldn't. It was an awareness, an eye opener for everybody."

More than 100 Soldiers, Airmen and Civilians showed for the remembrance run. All the runners had different motives for wanting to run, although to some, the attacks on September 11 were more personal.

"I'm running this for my cousin who was on one of those planes," said Phillip Mund, Company C, 2nd Battalion, 5th Field Artillery Brigade.

"Just prior to my retiring, I responded to the World Trade Center," said Tom Lombardo, a civilian contractor assisting the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment with security and law enforcement. "I worked in Manhattan; I was with the Manhattan North Homicide Squad. I was working that day when I got the call and we all ended up going down there. It was a chaotic scene as you could imagine."

"It's surreal, you think 9-11… where we were, where we are now and where the nation's going, we were in prehistoric times," said Brig. Gen. Raymond Thomas, the deputy commanding general, 1st Armored Division and Task Force Iron. "I don't even think we even realized how profound the moment really is. Hopefully, we relish today just like you relish every day and get the most out of it."

Even though September 11was a tragic time, it brought us together then and it brought us together now, said 1st Lt. Darin Shearer, a platoon leader, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment. "It's kind of sobering but it's great that we are all here, that we're alive and we're allowed to gather and run."

Before the run began there was a wreath laying ceremony.

"The ceremony is in recognition of those who lost their lives during 9-11," Culley said. "It's as a symbolic jester to everybody for them to remember and show reverence to those that lost their lives at the same time.

Also the FOB Marez firefighters were recognized with medals during the ceremony.

Seven years ago, September 11 blind-sided Americans with the unthinkable and knocked the country on its feet. But, something happened; when America stood back up a newfound since of patriotism and a stronger bond was formed. Although lives were lost that day, seven years later, Americans still stand together.

Soldiers, Airmen and civilians begin the 4-mile run which commemorates the lives lost on September 11, 2001, outside the main fitness center on Forward Operating Base Marez, in Mosul, Iraq. More than 100 runners showed to support the 4-mile remembrance run.

CALIFORNIA

(AP) Atul Vyas scored in the top 1 percent on his medical school entry exams, but he was having trouble answering one question on applications to Harvard and Duke: Describe a hardship you've overcome.

He said, 'I've not had any, I've had a blessed life,'" Vijay Vyas said of his son Sunday.

Atul Vyas never finished the application, never came closer his goal of working in biomechanics. On Friday, he was among 25 killed when a Metrolink commuter train collided with a freight train in nearby Chatsworth. He was 20. The accident was the nation's deadliest rail disaster in 15 years.

Other victims included a yoga instructor, an aspiring clothing designer, an air traffic controller and a seven-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The train, which was carrying 222 people when it crashed during afternoon rush hour, was headed north toward Ventura County from downtown Los Angeles.

On Sunday, relatives and friends gathered to plan funerals and mourn together.

Atul Vyas was sitting in the front car of the Metrolink train, on his way to visit his parents in Simi Valley, his father said.

Atul's elder brother, who lives in London, was flying into Los Angeles on Sunday afternoon. His parents did not tell him why they were summoning him to America, only that there was a family emergency.

"He has no idea," Vijay Vyas said. "I said, 'I don't want to discuss it, just show up.'"

Larry Remata had been celebrating the birthday of his 100-year-old mother in Hawaii when he first learned his wife, Donna, hadn't made it home from her downtown job.

Hours later, he learned she had died.

"I was shocked, I was mad, I was confused," said Remata, 58, a bus mechanic for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority. "I had all kinds of mixed emotions after hearing how the train accident happened."

"Right now, I am grieving," said Remata, who was planning to take his wife to Las Vegas for her 50th birthday next month. "It is starting to hit me a little bit. Especially seeing her name in the newspaper — it hurt me more."

The LAPD mourned one of its own.

Officer Spree Desha, 35, was heading home to Simi Valley from work. Desha had worked for the department for seven years and spent much of her career training new officers. She had been honored 34 times for performance and professional qualities, the department said.

"She sat in the first train (car) as a matter of practice, in uniform, so if someone came on the train and made trouble, she was ready to help out," Assistant Chief Jim McDonnell said Saturday.

In Simi Valley, where several victims had lived, officials were planning a community meeting Sunday to console residents and answer questions.

In a Starbucks just a block from the Metrolink's Simi Valley station that was frequented by many of the dead before they boarded their daily train, the daughter of one victim sat in an overstuffed armchair and remembered her father, Walter Fuller.

The 58-year-old was in charge of the control tower at Burbank Airport, north of Los Angeles, and worked for the Federal Aviation Administration, Kristi Fuller said.

Walter Fuller had been sitting in the front passenger car in a forward-facing chair, his family learned. Other family friends who were riding in backward-facing chairs walked away from the crash.

"It was very sad, we miss him and we miss him in our home — but we know that he went to a better place," said Fuller, 22, who described her family as devout Christians.

Fuller said her father was nicknamed "Grandpa" for his premature gray hair. He loved practical jokes and kept a jar of candy on his desk.

"He was serious when he needed to be," she said, "but he loved to joke around and give everybody a hard time."

HEALTH

(Reuters) The Food and Drug Administration this week reopens the debate over a chemical used in many plastic products -- including baby bottles -- amid mixed messages on its safety from the U.S. government.

An FDA panel of outside experts on Tuesday was set to review the agency's draft report issued last month saying that bisphenol A, or BPA, is safe. Critics argue the FDA has ignored strong evidence in animal studies that BPA is harmful.

Government toxicologists at the U.S. National Institutes of Health on September 3 reiterated their view that BPA presents "some concern" for harmful effects on development of the prostate and brain and for behavioral changes in fetuses, infants and children.

BPA is used to make polycarbonate plastic, a clear shatter-resistant material in products ranging from baby and water bottles to sports safety equipment and medical devices.

It also is used to make durable epoxy resins used as the coating in most food and beverage cans and in dental fillings.

People can consume BPA when it leaches out of plastic into liquid such as baby formula, water or food inside a container.

Environmental and consumer safety groups say studies show the chemical can interfere with how the body absorbs the hormone estrogen, which is key to the development of young bodies.

The NIH's National Toxicology Program, or NTP, became the first U.S. government agency to embrace health concerns regarding BPA. It followed up this draft report with a final report this month reiterating the concerns.

The FDA said the meeting would focus on these worries.

"FDA concludes that an adequate margin of safety exists for BPA at current levels of exposure from food contact uses, for infants and adults," the FDA said in its draft report.

The agency said its findings were based on "a full examination of data considered pivotal to the relevant exposure levels associated with food contact substances."

The European Union's top food safety body said in July the amount of BPA found in baby bottles cannot harm human health.

"Many common consumer products that contribute to healthier and safer lives are based on plastics and resins made from bisphenol A, which has a 50-year safety track record," the American Chemistry Council industry group said in a statement.

Critics have argued the FDA's views are based principally on industry-funded studies clearing the chemical even though many other studies have raised health concerns.

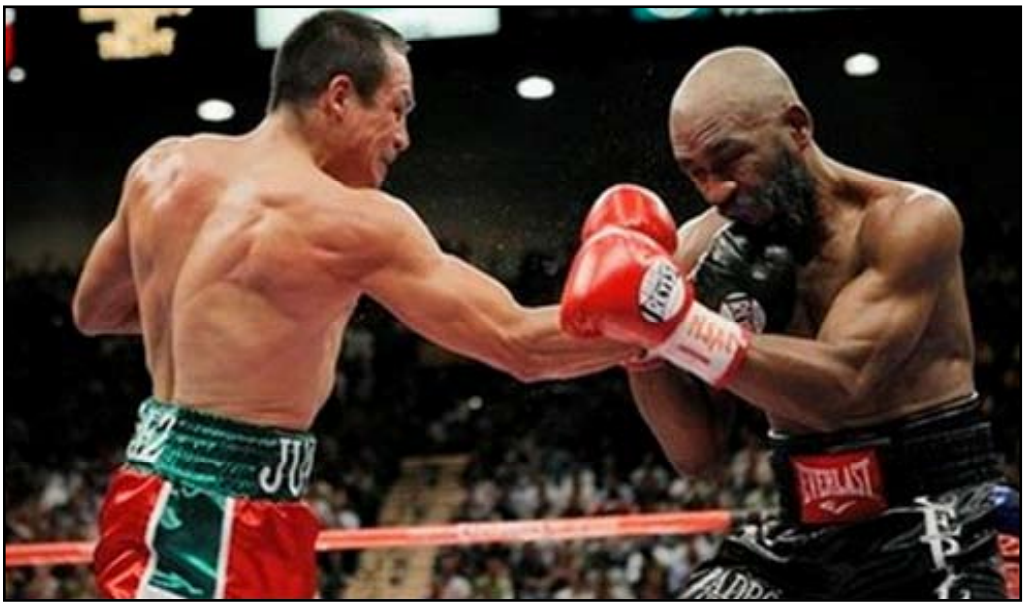
"We have serious concerns about FDA's risk assessment for bisphenol A," Sonya Lunder of the Environmental Working Group advocacy organization said in a telephone interview.

"I am hopeful the agency will begin to listen to the large amount of scientific evidence from independent scientists about the consequences of bisphenol A, particularly on children's health, and weigh that very heavily against industry-supported science that has been informing their decisions," said Elizabeth Hitchcock of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group.

Some leading retailers plan to stop selling products made with BPA and some manufacturers say they will phase it out.

Democratic U.S. senators in April introduced a bill to ban BPA in children's products. Canada's government in April decided BPA was harmful to infants and toddlers and announced plans to ban some products.

U.S. states including California, Maryland, Minnesota and Michigan are considering bills to ban or restrict BPA in children's products.



BOXING

(AP) Juan Manuel Marquez needed about three rounds to get comfortable as a lightweight. After that, he was nothing but bad news for Joel Casamayor.

Marquez won his 135-pound debut Saturday night, stopping linear champion Casamayor for the first time in the Cuban's career with a dynamic flurry late in the 11th round.

Marquez (49-4-1, 36 KOs) held title belts in two lighter divisions over the last five years, but moved up to lightweight in hopes of landing a third bout with Manny Pacquiao after going 0-1-1 against the pound-for-pound king.

The Mexican veteran proved those extra five pounds are nothing but punching power in a comprehensive win over Casamayor (36-4-1), the 37-year-old Cuban Olympic champion and defector who has unofficially ruled a talent-stacked division since beating Diego Corrales two years ago.

Marquez might be heavier now, but he's still light enough to leap onto the ropes to celebrate another big win.

"I figured this would be a tough fight until the end, but I was a more intelligent fighter," Marquez said. "I was watching out for myself, and I knew how to neutralize his left hand. I threw all my combinations, because I knew I couldn't win with just my right hand."

Marquez was tentative in the first three rounds, allowing Casamayor to take charge. When Marquez finally got aggressive, Casamayor wasn't able to keep up.

Marquez left nothing to the scorecards in the final minute of the 11th when he floored Casamayor with a right hand that spun the Cuban's chin. Marquez then showed impeccable finishing skills, landing several big blows before a glassy-eyed Casamayor went down for good on consecutive right hands with about 7 seconds left.

"I fought as a champion, but Marquez was the best this night," Casamayor said. "I deserve a rematch. Marquez knew how to control my punches. I had a bad night. I'm very emotional right now, but I honestly need the rematch."

Marquez probably has bigger goals to chase. He's among boxing's top talents, but the 34-year-old is running out of time to join the sport's elite stars — and he was surpassed in the hearts of many Mexican fans by welterweight Antonio Margarito, who stopped Miguel Cotto in July to become the boxing-mad nation's highest-profile champion.

This TKO should be a big step in getting Marquez back to the top, particularly if a certain Filipino phenomenon happened to be watching. Pacquiao, who made his own lightweight debut in June, is expected to move back to 135 pounds after his big-money welterweight bout against Oscar De La Hoya, Marquez's promoter.

"We moved up in weight, and we will fight anyone that our promoter wants," Marquez said. "He was the best lightweight in the world, and he has strong counterpunches."

Casamayor holds none of the major title belts, but has beaten both the late Corrales and Nate Campbell, who holds the other three 135-pound title belts after upsetting Juan Diaz last March. Casamayor appeared to be on his career's downslope in recent fights, winning a questionable decision over Jose Armando Santa Cruz and struggling in a win over Michael Katsidis last spring.

He still presented all kinds of awkwardness for Marquez. Few fighters have ever looked good against Casamayor's array of head butts, elbow blows and general left-handedness — but Marquez managed to shine.

The punch stats were fairly even, with Marquez landing higher percentages in total punches and power punches to counter Casamayor's higher overall total. The fight was tight on the judges' scorecards, with two judges seeing the fight even after 10 rounds, while Glenn Feldman favored Marquez 97-93.

Marquez began with extreme caution, showing none of the cavalier showmanship of his two lively fights with Pacquiao. Casamayor was happy to pick away with left-handed shots while controlling the first three rounds.

But Marquez opened a cut above Casamayor's right eye in the fourth round, apparently from an accidental clash of heads. Marquez turned the physical tide with a persistent jab and a higher work rate, limiting Casamayor to mostly single punches that did no damage.

Mexican fans dominated the MGM Grand crowd, booing Casamayor heartily — but Casamayor has loved being the villain since winning his gold medal at the Barcelona Games 16 years ago. The heavily bearded Cuban entered the ring in a Mexican sombrero and pitch-black trunks.

GOLF

(AP) Angela Stanford won the Bell Micro LPGA Classic on Sunday for her second career LPGA Tour title, holing a 3 1/2-foot par putt on the final hole for a 1-over 73 and a one-stroke victory over China's Shanshan Feng.

It's been so long," said Stanford, also the 2003 ShopRite LPGA Classic winner.

The 30-year-old Texan, four strokes ahead entering the day after consecutive 67s in the second and third rounds, had an 11-under 277 total on The Crossings course at Magnolia Grove. She earned $210,000.

The 19-year-old Feng birdied the 18th for a 68.

Kim Hall was third at 8 under after a 69, and Hee Young Park (70), Danielle Downey (70) and Katherine Hull (73) followed at 7 under.

Stanford had four birdies, three bogeys and double bogey in the final round.

"I'm more relieved than excited. I'm just relieved that I did it again," Stanford said. "I honestly believe the second time is harder, because the first time you don't really know what's happening and then you just try to do it again. I've been trying, and probably too hard."

Sanford missed a 3-foot putt for birdie on 17 and a 12-foot birdie try on 18 before make the 3 1/2-footer for par to claim the title.

After the putt, she dropped her putter and turned and hugged caddie Dan Chapman. Fellow players Brittany Lincicome and Kristy McPherson then ran onto the green and showered her with champagne.

"I didn't get that my first time," Stanford said of the shower. "I won (the first time) in my third year and I feel like I'm a different person now. I think it's with anybody, you kind of grow up. You've seen a lot of peaks and valleys in five years."

Feng had her chances to earn her first career win, lipping out on a putt for eagle on 16. She did eagle the fourth hole, her fourth eagle of the tournament and second on the 448-yard, par-5 hole. She also eagled 16 twice.

"I was pretty nervous at the last hole because I had a chance to win, but I had to make birdie," said Feng, who shared the first-round lead. "I was very happy, but I knew that's what I could do. I did my best. ... I really want to win, but I know I'm still young so I'll have my chances."

NIGERIA

(AFP) Militants on Monday attacked a Shell facility in Nigeria's restive southern Delta region, a day after an armed group declared an "oil war," a military official said.

The most prominent armed group in the region, MEND, which had declared the "oil war", immediately said it was responsible for the attack in Rivers State, claiming to have destroyed the Anglo-Dutch group's Alakiri station.

The facility was attacked and set alight just after midnight with "dynamite and other explosives," but "the attack was beaten back," Lieutenant-Colonel Moussa Sagir told AFP.

Sagir said an exchange of gunfire pitted armed men who arrived on a dozen or so speedboats against a joint military task force.

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) said in an email to the media that an operation code-named Hurricane Barbarossa had "razed to the ground" the station.

"Heavily armed fighters from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta stormed the facility and have razed it to the ground as promised," it said.

"The foolhardy workers and soldiers who did not heed our warning perished inside the station. The facility was still burning when we left.

"MEND reiterates its previous warnings to all oil workers in the entire Niger Delta region to evacuate from oil facilities and halt production with immediate effect or they will have themselves to blame."

The group said Sunday that its "war" was in response to what it says were unprovoked aerial and marine attacks by the army Saturday on one of its positions.

MEND has changed the security paradigm in oil-rich southern Nigeria since its emergence in early 2006 -- multiplying attacks, kidnappings of foreign oil workers and sabotage on land and offshore.

It has caused Nigeria to lose one quarter of its oil production, costing Lagos its place as the biggest crude oil producer in Africa, with Angola recently taking that title.

The group says it is fighting for a larger share of Nigeria's oil revenue to go to local

populations.

In June, it attacked Bonga, the flagship deepwater field of Anglo-Dutch giant Royal Dutch Shell.

Sited 120 kilometres (75 miles) from Nigeria's coast, Bonga had, until that attack, been seen as safely out of the reach of militant raids.

No one knows who supports and finances this group that presents itself as the champion of Nigeria's 14 million Ijaw people. Nothing is known of the number of fighters it can call upon.

CHINA

(AFP) Chinese officials said Monday that private milk-collecting stations were likely at fault for a rapidly unfolding scandal over tainted infant formula that has left two babies dead and nearly 600 ill.

The New Zealand partner to the Chinese company Sanlu at the centre of the storm went further, saying the contamination amounted to sabotage.

All 19 people detained so far in a nationwide probe into how the chemical melamine came to contaminate the formula are from the stations, which pick up milk from dairy farmers, the state-controlled China Daily said.

"It's unlikely that dairy farmers mixed the industrial chemical melamine in fresh milk," it quoted Li Changjiang, who heads the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine, as saying.

He added: "We believe the contamination is more likely to have occurred at milk-collecting stations."

This is in contrast to initial statements from Sanlu Group, the company at the centre of the scandal, which fingered dairy farmers for the contamination, the paper said.

The Xinhua news agency said two brothers in northern China's Hebei province -- who are among the 19 detained -- had been formally arrested for allegedly selling three tonnes of contaminated milk per day from their station.

The duo allegedly decided to add melamine after Sanlu repeatedly rejected their milk for failing to meet standards, it added, citing Hebei police.

Melamine, which is used for making plastics and glues, may have been added to make the milk appear it contained more protein than was actually the case, Chinese media have suggested.

Xinhua two babies, both in northwest China's Gansu province, had now been confirmed dead after drinking the contaminated milk powder.

Nationwide, the number of babies sick with kidney stones after drinking the formula has risen to about 580, up from 432, the China Daily said.

In Gansu province alone there were 223 babies and infants suffering kidney stones, which are unusual among young children, the Gansu Daily said.

Chinese inspectors have fanned out into major milk-producing regions to try to contain the developing scandal, media reported.

In Gansu province, they found melamine in samples selected at random from Haoniu Dairy Co., a partner of Sanlu Group but which produces under the Sanlu trademark, according to Xinhua.

"The products of Haoniu have been sealed up," Gansu Vice Governor Xian Hui told the agency. Sanlu, in which New Zealand dairy giant Fonterra has a 43 percent stake, is a relatively inexpensive brand favoured by poor rural women.

Use of infant formula is growing in China as women from the countryside go to work in the cities and so are unable to breastfeed their own children.

Fonterra's chief executive Andrew Ferrier alleged the contamination was the result of third-party sabotage of raw milk supplied to Sanlu.

"In this case we frankly have sabotage of a product," he said. "Our hearts go out to the parents and the infants who were affected."

Speaking to New Zealand reporters by video from Singapore, he said Fonterra had known of the contamination in early August and wanted an immediate recall but Sanlu had to abide by Chinese rules.

"We together with Sanlu have done everything that we possibly could to get the product off the shelf," Ferrier said.

Asked why Fonterra had not gone public earlier, he said it would have been "irresponsible" for Sanlu not to have followed the guidelines set by Chinese authorities.

"We as a minority shareholder had to continue to push Sanlu. Sanlu had to work with their own government to follow the procedures that they were given," he said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said her government learned of the contamination problem on September 5, then "blew the whistle" three days later by informing Beijing after local Chinese officials refused to act.