

US undaunted by...

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er hand, ordered Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro to leave the investigation of the roadside bombing in Sulu to the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) under Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita.

The President directed Teodoro to focus on the ongoing relief and rehabilitation efforts.

The military, on the other hand, blamed the Abu Sayyaf bandit group for the roadside bombing that killed the two American servicemen and a Filipino Marine in Indanan last Tuesday.

Western Mindanao Command chief Maj. Gen. Benjamin Dolorfino said the Abu Sayyaf and its Jemaah Islamiyah cohorts could have used an improvised explosive device (IED) planted along the road in Barangay Kagay that wounded two other Filipino Marines.

The two American soldiers and a Filipino Marine were part of a contingent of a humanitarian mission to construct a clinic and a barangay hall in the area.

The slain American soldiers were identified as Staff Sergeant Jack Martin and Sergeant First Class Christopher Shaw, members of the Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines assigned to the Naval Construction Battalions, or Seabees, which gather skilled craftsmen like electricians and carpenters into special military units.

The Filipino Marines were accompanying the American soldiers in a convoy when the IED exploded, destroying the Humvee vehicle they were riding in.

"We suspected the Abu Sayyaf behind the bombing because they don't want development to come to the areas," Dolorfino said.

Dolorfino said the US troops pulled out following the attack, leaving the Filipino Marines to

guard the ongoing construction projects in the area.

He said the initial investigation revealed the blast was caused by an IED that "most likely" had a pressure switch for a trigger.

He said the IED could not have been triggered by remote control using a mobile phone because there was no signal in the area.

"The bomb was planted and we presumed nobody was there because there was no secondary firing following the explosion," he said.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman told reporters in Washington on Monday it was the first time the 600-strong US contingent in the Philippines had been targeted by an IED, a frequent tactic used by insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dolorfino revealed Abu Sayyaf leader Albader Parad had warned of attacks on American troops to avenge their losses following the military offensive in the area.

Despite the attack, Dolorfino said the US military would continue humanitarian projects in many areas of Sulu but with tighter security.

He said security and intelligence surveillance operations have been intensified in places of engagement.

"The troops will utilize helicopters in visiting the project sites," Dolorfino said.

The US embassy in Manila said the US soldiers were non-combatants and were on a supply run for a school construction project when the explosion took place. But it would not say who was responsible.

Dolorfino backed up the embassy's statement that the US troops were not involved in combat operations, saying they were helping to construct clinics, village halls, school buildings and other development projects in



The smoldering remains of a US military Humvee lies on the road after a landmine blast in Indanan town in Jolo. Two US soldiers and a Filipino Marine were killed in the attack. AP Photo

the region.

He said the Abu Sayyaf bandits were trying to prevent development aid from reaching the populace so that they could blame the government for the lack of facilities and further sow discontent.

Dolorfino said the incident would not shake the Americans' resolve to continue the fight against terrorism and render humanitarian assistance in the impoverished areas in Mindanao.

"I don't think they'll contemplate leaving," Dolorfino said. "Terrorism threats are transnational, and the US has a very strong commitment to fight it here."

The Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) regional police also sent investigators in the scene to identify those behind the attack.

ARMM Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan has ordered the regional police and the provincial government of Sulu to enlist the help

of religious and political leaders in the province in identifying the bombers and filing criminal charges against them.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) also urged the ARMM regional police to investigate the possible involvement

of renegade MNLF commander Ustadz Habier Malik, who has reportedly been ranting about the military's attack of a known MNLF enclave in Indanan during Eid al-Fitr, which led to the killing of several civilians.

ARMM police operations di-

rector Superintendent Danilo Bacas said Ampatuan has tasked the Sulu provincial police to involve former members of the MNLF integrated into the police force to identify the culprits in the roadside bombing.

Officials said US troops have long been targets of extremists in Mindanao. Two weeks ago, a suspected Abu Sayyaf militant or sympathizer hurled a grenade near US troops unloading supplies at Jolo's pier.

The Abu Sayyaf was also tagged in the killing of an American Marine with a nail-laden motorcycle bomb in Malagutay district in Zamboanga City in October 2002.

US counterterrorism troops were deployed to the region earlier that year.

Abu Sayyaf is believed to have about 400 fighters, to have received funds from al-Qaeda and is suspected of sheltering militants from the larger Southeast Asian terror group Jemaah Islamiyah.

An estimated 600 US troops are currently stationed in the Philippines, mostly in southern Mindanao in front lines of the Philippine military's operations against the Abu Sayyaf group and Jemaah Islamiyah. ■

'Ombudsman's term...

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this month as she is only serving the unexpired term of Marcelo.

"Gutierrez is not entitled to a full term of seven years, according to a 1955 Supreme Court ruling which has not been overturned," he said.

"While she may have escaped impeachment, the Ombudsman might not overcome this legal impediment."

Escudero said since Marcelo had served as Ombudsman for over three years, Gutierrez only has four years in office, which ends this month.

"When the Constitution fixes the duration of a

term of office, and at the same time provides for its being filled at a fixed time occurring periodically, it necessarily follows that a casual vacancy occurring during such term of office, necessity must arise for filling it for the unexpired term; and although the mode of filling such vacancy is prescribed by the Constitution, yet the incumbent only holds until the time arrives for filling the office in the regular mode and at the regular time prescribed by the Constitution," he said, quoting the Supreme Court decision in the case of Republic v. Imperial.

Escudero said the Constitution provides a fixed term of seven years for the Ombudsman, not the person occupying the position. ■

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