

Philippines: Sumisip Town on 'red alert' after New Year's Eve blast



Police seek motive for Mindanao bombing that killed seven. A blast victim receives treatment at a hospital in Basilan. (Picture by Larry Lorenzo)

Authorities have placed the town of Sumisip in Mindanao's Basilan province on "extreme red alert" after a bomb exploded down the street from a Catholic church, killing seven people and wounding five others on New Year's Eve.

The bomb exploded at 10:22pm outside the home of Manuel Casineros, which is about 100 ms from the San Vicente Ferrer Parish church in the village of Tumahubong, according to the military.

Casineros, who is the parish priest's driver as well as a pro-government militiaman volunteer, was hosting a New Year's Eve party at the time of the explosion. The church, meanwhile, was hosting its annual New Year's Eve Mass.

Police said the motive for the attack was unclear, although Casineros apparently had been helping authorities in protecting rubber plantation workers from extortion by armed gangs, including the Abu Sayyaf group.

Casineros' wife and mother-in-law were among those killed by the explosion, said Fr Angel Calvo of the Claretian congregation. "We condemn once more this act of violence in Basilan."

Local authorities, including Bishop Martin Jumoad of Basilan and Governor Mujiv Hataman of the

Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, are "on the ground" to assess the situation, said Fr Larry Lorenzo, who heads the Claretian congregation's mission on the island.

"The place is on extreme red alert now," he added.

Hataman announced that the government would bear the cost of funeral expenses for the victims and provide assistance to affected families.

"For the wounded who are in hospital, we will take care of their hospital bills and are providing their families with food allowances," he said.

Senior Superintendent Mario Dapilloza, Basilan police commander, said police were still trying to determine the exact motive behind the attack, while explosive ordnance experts were trying to ascertain the type of bomb that was used.

"Security and law enforcement authorities have been directed to pursue and arrest the perpetrators," Communications Secretary Sonny Coloma said yesterday.

The presidential palace also issued a statement condemning the attack as "senseless violence".

Last year Abu Sayyaf ambushed a convoy carrying plantation workers, killing six people and wounding 22 others in Tumahubong.

Authorities believe the group is still holding a number of foreign and Filipino hostages, including two European birdwatchers and a Japanese treasure hunter.

Joe Torres and AFP, Manila