

Bombs threaten peace prospects in southern Philippines

Attack on university students heightens fears amid negotiations



It was a long day for students of Central Mindanao University in Maramag town in the province of Bukidnon. Many of them were rushing to catch a ride and get home before dinner. In December, darkness arrives early in this part of the world.

At about 5:30pm on December 9, several students were already trying to outrun one another to a red bus that would take them to the nearby city of Malaybalay. The students crowded into the vehicle although they would have to stand inside for the whole trip.

About a kilometer after the packed bus left the main gate of the university, a powerful explosion ripped through the roof, sending shrapnel and debris in all directions. A sea of mangled metal, shards of glass, bags and shoes covered in blood greeted the first responders. A column of smoke rose into the evening sky.

At least 11 people, including five students, died while 43 others were injured in the explosion.

"I saw people getting off the bus, some bloodied," said Melissa Leah Diana, a teacher who'd seen off 17-year-old Mariel Achacoso on the bus a few minutes earlier. Achacoso was one of those who perished in the explosion.

"She was of strong faith, bubbly and smart. A brighter future could have been waiting for her," Diana said of Achacoso, who was from Malaybalay City. "We could not do anything for her. We were afraid. We are afraid now," she said.

RJ Soliven, a history student at the university, was preparing to head home when he heard the blast, which he thought was caused by a blown out truck tire.

"When I saw people rushing toward the scene of the explosion I realized that something must have happened," Soliven said. He saw survivors running toward the grassy portion on the side of the highway.

On International Human Rights Day, which was celebrated a day after the explosion, the usually vibrant campus was silent. Most students were wearing black shirts. Classes were suspended.

Joseph Cris Tadeo, a freshman, said he now fears boarding a bus especially after text messages circulated that the bombing was perpetrated by the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a breakaway rebel group.

Tadeo said he is afraid there could be another attack, this time inside the poorly-lit campus, which is located in the middle of the vast rice fields and farms that lie between the city of Valencia and Maramag town.

A week after the explosion, Philippine authorities still don't know for certain who was behind the attack. The military blames the BIFF, which broke away from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2008 and is composed of about 400 former MILF fighters.

In August, the BIFF pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in a statement posted on social media sites.

"The BIFF wants to undermine the peace process in Mindanao," said Lt Gen Aurelio Baladad, commander of the army's Eastern Mindanao Command.

But Abu Misry Mama, spokesman of the BIFF, denied the accusation, saying that his group has "no interest in attacking civilians".

He told ucanews.com in a telephone interview that investigators should follow the source of the bomb. "Who has mortar rounds? The investigators should wonder why explosives only accessible to government forces are being used," he said.

The military earlier said the bomb was made from a mortar round and was triggered by a mobile phone.

Mama also said that the BIFF's alliance with ISIS is "only based on the principle of creating an Islamic state" and not on getting funds from the terror group or on sending fighters to the Middle East.

In past months, however, the BIFF has stepped up attacks against military personnel and government installations in the southern Philippines, claiming that it is fighting for the creation of an Islamic state.

Local government officials in the province of Bukidnon said the motive behind the explosion could have been extortion, not Islamic terrorism.

Governor Jose Maria Zubiri said security officials have noticed similarities between the December 9 bombing and another attack on November 6, also in Maramag town.

The governor said the BIFF could not have carried out the attack. "We just celebrated our 100 years as a province and there were thousands of people attending the activities during the month-long celebration. If it was [the BIFF's] intention to harm people, they could have done that at the time," Zubiri said.

He also discounted the involvement of the communist New People' Army rebels, saying: "It is not their style to harm people."

He said if the communists want to go after the bus company, "all it has do is order the passengers out and burn the bus."

Police regional director Isagani Genabe said the authorities still have no conclusive findings about who was behind the incident.

Oblate priest Eliseo Mercado, head of the non-government Institute of Autonomy and Governance in Cotabato City, condemned the speculation even as he expressed doubt over the capability of Philippine officials to identify the bomb and trace its source.

He said armed groups — including the military — in the Mindanao region can easily produce an explosive device from a mortar round and set up a mobile phone as the detonator.

"How do you interpret or read the series of bombings in the southern Philippines? Who connects the dots? The authorities seem to be clueless. To whom shall we turn for security and safety?" Mercado said.

Given the progress of peace negotiations between the government and the 10,000-strong MILF, which is expected to end decades of conflict in Mindanao, "it is quite absurd" to blame Moro groups for being behind the attack, said Alih Aiyub, secretary-general of the National Ulama Conference of the Philippines.

Ayub said there are other players involved in hostilities and violence in the southern part of the country and "these are not necessarily limited to non-state armed groups".

He said "there is a high probability of a confluence of interests to stop the peace process" in Mindanao, including politicians and military officials who use the conflict in the southern Philippines to ask for higher budgets.

On Friday, Muslim residents of nearby Cotabato City offered food in a ritual called "kanduli," which is of Malay Muslim origin and a traditional way of imploring for God's intervention amid crisis.

Governor Mujiv Hataman of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao said they were holding the ritual amid the incidents of violence, including the recent bomb explosion that he described as "an evil act and a mortal sin beyond divine forgiveness".

He blamed "ignorance, arrogance and greed" as the root of violence in the region and labeled the perpetrators of the bus bombing as "cowards". He also urged Muslims in Mindanao to continue supporting the Bangsamoro, as the emerging Muslim political entity in Mindanao is called.

But Oblate priest Mercado said the emerging Bangsamoro cannot put a stop to the bombing. The priest said it can even be "the source of instability".

Ayub, however, said that regardless of the "complex situation", optimism among Mindanao residents is very high and that many believe they are living "at the dawn of peace".

He said addressing poverty, electoral reform, eliminating private armies and terrorism through the introduction of new institutions and policies can help eliminate violence in the region.

"Peace in Mindanao and the country is not just the silencing of the guns and bombs, but it is also about

having an enabling environment and a justly-balanced society," Ayub said. But he warned that people in the region will still have to face many challenges, including bomb attacks.

For Soliven, the grieving will not end with the lighting of candles and the wearing of black shirts. "We will have to call for justice. We will have to pray for peace," the student said.

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