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US forces rescue Filipino soldiers in clash with Abu

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By INQ7.net with Agence France-Press

UNITED States forces participating in the Balikatan exercises with the Philippine military had a near encounter with the Abu Sayyaf after they rescued soldiers who were wounded during a clash late Friday with the bandits in Basilan.

"Last night there was an operation where our assistance was requested for some wounded Philippine soldiers and we supported that request," Brigadier General Donald Wurster, the commander of the US forces in Mindanao, told reporters on Saturday, adding that a Pave Hawk helicopter ferried the wounded to a nearby hospital.

Wurster said, "The Philippine soldiers were engaged in combat, the American forces had to go to the combat (zone) to take them back to the hospital." He did not elaborate when asked if any Americans were involved in the firefight.

But Regional Army spokesman Captain Noel Detoyato said there were no US troops involved in the "chance encounter" on Friday in the village of Bolanza in Basilan.

Detoyato said the military was scouting for a campsite when they encountered the Abu Sayyaf rebels, resulting in the death of one soldier and the wounding of three others.

Some 160 US Special Forces are deployed in 12-man composite teams with Philippine soldiers in Basilan where the Abu Sayyaf have been holding hostage an American couple and a Filipina nurse since last year.

Officials said the US troops are to join their Filipino counterparts in foot patrols in Basilan's jungles beginning next week, but will not actively engage in combat. They are however allowed to fire back if attacked.