

# U.S. enters combat zone in Philippines

## **Troops retrieve injured Filipinos after rebel attack**

UPPER MANGGAS, Philippines, March 19 — Muslim extremists linked to Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaida network hurled grenades and fired small arms at a Philippine army patrol Tuesday, injuring two soldiers within earshot of U.S. troops and prompting four Green Berets to enter the combat zone in an attempt to retrieve the wounded.

THE U.S. TROOPS were turned back by fighting, but the response marked the second time Americans moved into combat zones in an attempt to help wounded Filipinos. Philippine soldiers ultimately evacuated their wounded colleagues.

Officials said at least four Abu Sayyaf rebels were killed in the firefight that erupted Tuesday morning on the southern island of Basilan, where U.S. troops and local politicians were discussing earlier clashes nearby.

Six other fleeing guerrillas were captured by troops, they said.

After frantic radio calls amid the distant din, four U.S. soldiers were told that 30 or so Philippine troops were surprised by about seven rebels near the meeting at the town hall of Atong Atong, about 620 miles south of Manila.

Platoon commander Lt. Lemuel Beduya later said that he immediately fell with a serious head wound and one of his men was shot in the arm.

“I was calling on the radio and then I met a hail of bullets — pop, pop, pop,” Beduya said later as U.S. troops treated his seriously bleeding wound. “They had a sniper with them. I asked my men to stay and not withdraw. I thought my time had already come.”

## **AMERICANS JOIN THE FRAY**

The U.S. soldiers loaded into a blue pickup truck, followed by Philippine troops in another truck and an armored personnel carrier, to determine whether they could remove the injured.

Philippine soldiers ultimately evacuated their wounded colleagues. The U.S. troops were turned back by fighting, but the response marked the second time they moved into combat zones in an attempt to help wounded Filipinos.

Last Friday night, two U.S. Pave Hawk helicopters evacuated three wounded soldiers and hauled out one dead after a clash with the Abu Sayyaf in the same area as Tuesday’s fight.

About 660 U.S. troops, including 160 Special Forces members, are in the southern Philippines to train Filipino soldiers battling the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim extremist group holding Wichita, Kan., missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham hostage along with Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap.

### **HIGH-TECH EQUIPMENT**

Officials said Tuesday that high-tech U.S. detection equipment was helping local soldiers pinpoint the hideouts of the Abu Sayyaf.

“There are positive indications for [the hostages’] swift recovery,” military spokesman Maj. Noel Detoyato said.

The Abu Sayyaf, thought to number 60 or so fighters on Basilan island, has been linked in the past to al-Qaida.

The U.S. soldiers are armed and are allowed into combat zones but can only fire in self-defense. The Special Forces members on Basilan are to stay at all times with Philippine commanders and have reportedly acted in combat zones only to treat Filipino wounded.

Philippine soldiers say U.S. night flight capability, particularly for medical evacuation, is crucial. Previously, some wounded have bled to death while being driven or hauled out of combat zones at night.

### **‘LET’S ROCK N’ ROLL’**

The U.S. soldiers responding to the firefight Tuesday first reached a hilltop at the edge of the combat zone where they were met by an armored personnel carrier and tried to gain access to the injured.

Army Capt. John Barrow, who accompanied Philippine battalion commander Col. Reynaldo Ordonez to the scene, said “it was too dangerous to get closer” and they turned back. Philippine soldiers moved their wounded colleagues through the coconut groves to a beach. They were picked up by a speedboat and evacuated to a seaside clearing to meet the U.S. troops.

“Let’s rock n’ roll,” shouted one Green Beret heading to the clearing, driving and listening to blaring Latin pop music on the truck stereo as another fixed his assault rifle on the wild coconut groves whizzing past.

At the clearing, Sgt. Robert Burton administered an intravenous drip and comforting words to Beduya. Another American set out a fuchsia flag to signal a helicopter landing zone while one more worked the radio to call in the Philippine Huey helicopters for the evacuation.

Beduya, seemingly only semiconscious and bleeding from the head, gave a weak thumbs up when asked about his condition and then praised the Americans treating him.

“They are a morale booster,” he said. “They are immediately around.”

**Note: Background information and links for info on terrorists in the Philippines**

● <b>Abu Sayyaf activities</b>
● <b>Birth of the Abu Sayyaf</b>
● <b>Possible al-Qaida links</b>
● <b>Operation base</b>
<b>Other Muslim groups</b>
● <b>Moro National Liberation Front</b>
● <b>Moro Islamic Liberation Front</b>

The home islands of the Philippines' Muslim minority have been the scene of fierce resistance to any form of outside non-Muslim influence. Despite tens of thousands of casualties in the 1970s alone, the area's conflict has remained relatively obscure to the outside world. But suspected links between one of the local resistance groups -- the Abu Sayyaf militia -- and al-Qaida operatives has brought international attention to these isolated islands just north of the equator.