

US medics help rescue 7 wounded RP soldiers

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By Julie S. Alipala, Martin P. Marfil and Inquirer Wires

BASILAN -- US military paramedics yesterday helped evacuate seven Filipino soldiers who were wounded in a mid-morning clash with Abu Sayyaf bandits in the Upper Mangas area.

Reporters also saw a US Army humvee jeep with five heavily armed US Special Forces troops speeding out of the 103rd Philippine Army Brigade headquarters at noon as fighting raged near the town of Lantawan.

But Capt. Noel Detoyato, Southern Command spokesperson, insisted the US soldiers did not take part in the clash at the coconut-growing villages of Bolansa and Tairan.

"They (US troops) responded when the operating (Filipino) troops sought assistance, but there were no Americans involved in the encounter," Detoyato said.

Army Col. Jessie Dellosa said about 60 members of the 10th and 12th Scout Ranger Companies ran into about 20 Abu Sayyaf bandits at about 10 a.m., triggering heavy fighting that continued into the afternoon.

Detoyato said two American paramedics took off with several of their Filipino counterparts aboard two Philippine Air Force UH-1H helicopters for the medical evacuation mission.

One of the Hueys first extricated three wounded soldiers, while a second helicopter later evacuated four additional wounded soldiers.

Detoyato said the helicopters landed in "an area safe from gunfire."

It was the third time since last Friday that American paramedics entered a combat zone for a medical evacuation mission, a major component of the RP-US military training exercise in Basilan.

Reporters at the scene said five American soldiers with assault rifles and bulletproof vests sped out of the 103rd Philippine Army Brigade headquarters aboard a US humvee jeep with a machine-gun mounted atop.

Reporters said three Filipino soldiers accompanied the American soldiers. Six US Special Forces soldiers are bunking with 60 Filipino soldiers and their commander in the sandbagged, hilltop base in the Upper Malangas area.

Scout Ranger Capt. Rommel Pagayon said bloodstains on the ground indicated Filipino

soldiers inflicted an undetermined number of casualties on the Abu Sayyaf bandits.

He said the soldiers also recovered women's clothing at the scene, indicating that at least one of the female hostages was with the Abu Sayyaf group believed to be under Isnilon Hapilon.

The group has been holding hostage American missionary couple Martin and Gracia Burnham and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap for the past nine months.

Unmanned US surveillance aircraft fly over Basilan regularly, increasing the number of sightings of the highly mobile bandits and enhancing the Philippine military's ability to engage them in combat.

Fighting in the area the past week has left one Filipino soldier dead and 12 others wounded. On Tuesday, US Green Berets entered a combat zone in the same area to render first aid after bandits firing rifle grenades and automatic weapons wounded two members of a Philippine Army patrol. At least four rebels were killed in several hours of fighting and six more were later captured.