



**PHILIPPINE INSTITUTE FOR PEACE, VIOLENCE
AND TERRORISM RESEARCH**

TERRORISM EVENTS ANALYSIS

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ZAMBOANGA CITY BOMBING: A SUICIDE TERRORISM?

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On 5 August 2010 at around 6:15 PM, a bomb exploded near the arrival area of the Zamboanga City International Airport. This incident, which is considered by the police and the military as a terrorist attack, instantly killed 2 persons and injured 22 others as of this writing. One of the two persons killed was a suspected bomber, identified as Reynaldo Apilado who is believed to be on a "suicide mission" using an anti-personnel improvised explosive device (IED).

Was the Zamboanga City bombing of 5 August 2010 the first suicide terrorist attack in the Philippines carried out by a Filipino?

Witnesses close to the incident said that a man blew himself up just outside the arrival gate of the Zamboanga City international airport.¹ An official investigative report corroborated this claim when it underscored that a "suicide bomber detonated himself near the arrival area...to coincide with the departure of arriving passengers at the arrival gate."² The "alleged suicide bomber was instantly killed," the official report continued.³

¹ "First suicide bombing in Philippines targets provincial Governor", *Today On Line* (6 August 2010) at <http://www.todayonline.com/World/EDC100806-0000117/First-suicide-bombing-in-Philippines-targets-provincial-Governor>.

² "Zambo Airport Blast Kills 2; Us Envoy Scraps Visit ", *ABS-CBN News* (6 August 2010) at <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/08/05/10/blast-hits-zamboanga-city-airport-1-dead>.

³ *Ibid.*

But Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat argued that “authorities could not immediately confirm suspicions that the incident was a case of suicide bombing.”⁴ Lobregat ordered the convening of a local crisis management committee to assist in the investigation.

Though some local experts and foreign analysts have strongly dismissed the possibility of suicide terrorism in the Philippines, Muslims in Mindanao, particularly the Tausugs, have a long-held tradition of a suicide attack called locally as “Parang Sabbil”.

Parang Sabbil, which has become an epic in Mindanao, is a local interpretation of FISABBILILLAH, which means “dying for the cause of Allah.” Parang Sabbil was carried out by Muslims during the Spanish colonial rule of the Philippine archipelago, except the Muslim stronghold of Mindanao. Spanish colonial forces defectively described this practice as “juramentado” to describe a Muslim warrior running hammock against Spanish soldiers. But for the Muslims of Mindanao now called as Moros, Parang Sabbil was a spiritual mission to defend their homeland against oppressors and infidels.⁵

The first recorded suicide attack in the Philippines occurred in 1991 in the province of Maguindanao. But this attack was carried out not by a Muslim Filipino but by a foreign national.

After September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Filipino Muslim converts have crossed their minds to mount a suicide mission. Leaders of what is now called as Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement (RSIM) trained potential suicide bombers in February 2002.

After a month of training, five RSIM members reportedly took the *Shaheed* (Martyrdom Pledge) to undergo a suicide mission scheduled in May 2002. This mission allegedly aimed to assassinate President Arroyo with the use of a “truck bomb”. But the raid of RSIM hideouts in Central Luzon that year halted the mission. The raid resulted in the death of one and the arrest of four potential suicide bombers.⁶

The 2004 Superferry Bombing, which resulted in the death of 116 passengers and injury of 300 others, was originally planned as a suicide mission. But the suspect, Redento Cain Delloso, who is now in prison for that incident, changed his mind and just reportedly left the bomb inside the ferry. Police investigators discovered that Delloso was the passenger 51 of the said ferry using the name, Arnulfo Alvarado.

⁴ “Probers identify suspected Zambo airport bomber,” ABS-CBN New (6 August 2010) at <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/regions/08/06/10/probers-identify-suspected-zambo-airport-bomber>.

⁵ For more discussions, see Thomas M. Kiefer, “Parang Sabbil: Ritual Suicide Among the Tausug of Jolo” in Peter Gowing (ed), *Understanding Islam and Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988), pp. 53-67.

⁶ Rommel C. Banlaoi, “The Rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement: Suicide Terrorism in the Philippines”, *IDSS Commentaries* (6 October 2006).

Law enforcement agencies are still investigating which group that carried out the bombing and for what purpose. But four views have so far emerged on the main purpose of the said attack:

The first view said the main target of the mission was believed to be Governor Abdusakur Tan who was hurt during the incident. Governor Tan, in fact, admitted that he was the main target. In an interview, Governor Tan stressed, "I believe I was the target. I saw the man fall to the ground and his head was severed."⁷ If Governor Tan was indeed a target, suspect may come from rival politicians or personalities associated with the Abu Syyaf Group (ASG), Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) or Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) who have an axe to grind against the governor for political, economic and criminal reasons.

The second view stated that the main target was US Ambassador Harry Thomas who was set to visit the city to accompany Gloria Steele, the new director of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The main purpose of the attack was to prevent these two US officials to come to Mindanao, which is host to around 500 American soldiers associated with the Joint Special Operation Task Force (JSOTF) stationed at the Western Mindanao Command (WESTMINCOM) of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in Zamboanga City. With this view, the likely suspect will come from the ASG and Jemaah Islamiyyah (JI) who are known for their anti-American sentiment. A shadowy group called the Bangsamoro National Liberation Army (BNLA) may also be a suspect for having been operating in the Zamboanga Peninsula, Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi. The BNLA is allied to MNLF and has claimed responsibility for the roadside bombing in Jolo that killed two American Navy soldiers on 29 September 2009.

The third view stressed that the main target was Papal Nuncio Edward Joseph Adam who was scheduled to land in Zamboanga City to visit the Municipality of Ipil in Zamboanga Sibugay province. This view can make the ASG and JI as likely suspects for apparent ideological reasons.

The fourth view intimated that the attack was in retaliation to the arrest of Edgar Malaydan who has been identified by the police and the military as a Filipino member of the Al-Qaeda linked JI. Malaydan was arrested in Compostela Valley on 2 August 2010. He used to be a member of the 105th Base Command of the MILF until he was recruited to join JI to serve as conduit between JI and ASG in bomb trainings and Kidnap-for-Ransom operations. Malaydan was also associated with the Venancio Kidnap-for-Ransom Group in Central Mindanao. For obvious reason, the likely suspect may come from JI, ASG or believers from the MILF. If JI is the suspect, the bombing can be a dress rehearsal for future suicide missions in the Philippines. The Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research (PIPVTR) has recently received information that Umar Patek, one of the most wanted JI leaders in Mindanao, has built two suicide vests similar with those used by suicide bombers in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia.

⁷ "First suicide bombing in Philippines targets provincial Governor", *Today On Line* (6 August 2010) at <http://www.todayonline.com/World/EDC100806-0000117/First-suicide-bombing-in-Philippines-targets-provincial-Governor>.

As of this writing, law enforcement authorities are still investigating the details of the Zamboanga City bombing, which has caused a very serious security problem considering that the city has been a target of some terrorist attacks in the past.

Whatever maybe the result of the investigation, it is certain that terrorist threats continue to loom large in the Philippines despite all the proactive and preventive measures already in place. Moreover, the idea of suicide terrorism can happen in the country considering the past Muslim tradition on the matter and the current intention of some Muslim extremist to revive and continue the tradition.

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