

## Davao del Sur Bus Bombing

**Date: 1 September 2008**

**Location: Digos City, Davao del Sur, Philippines**

### The Incident

At 1445 hrs, a bomb ripped through a packed passenger bus at a bus terminal in Digos City in Davao del Sur. The blast left seven people dead and at least 30 others wounded several of them in critical condition.<sup>1</sup> The fatalities include a pregnant woman and a policeman who were among the passengers of the bus. Most of the injured, meanwhile, suffered shrapnel wounds and burns on their bodies.



Police authorities said the Metro Shuttle Cruiser bus No. 209 had just arrived at the terminal from Davao City on its way to Malita when the bomb exploded.<sup>2</sup> An improvised explosive device (IED) packed with steel nails and stowed in an overhead bin reportedly caused the explosion, which tore a hole in the roof of the bus and shattered the bus' windows.<sup>3</sup>

Investigations revealed that the ill-fated bus picked up several passengers along the way from Davao City. Among them is an unidentified woman who boarded the bus with three male companions about a kilometer away from the bus terminal. Reports indicate that the woman hurriedly disembarked from the bus seconds before the bomb exploded. One of the passengers who survived the attack also said she overheard the suspected woman bomber asking other passengers not to let someone take her seat as

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<sup>1</sup> "(UPDATE) Digos bus blasts toll rises to 8," Inquirer.net, 2 September 2008, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view/20080902-158182/Digos-bus-blast-toll-rises-to-8>

<sup>2</sup> "6 dead, 30 injured in Digos City bombing," Sunstar, 2 September 2008, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/static/net/2008/09/02/6.dead.30.injured.in.digos.city.bombing.html>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

she was coming back and that as soon as the woman disembarked, the explosion took place. Other suspects include an unidentified man who appeared to be fidgety before the blast and was seen standing a few meters from the bus, but ran away shortly after the explosion.

## **Perpetrators**

No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack--the second blast to hit Digos City in just over a month. However, authorities are eyeing the Al-Khobar extortion group, which was behind the series of bomb attacks in 2006 and 2007 on Weena and Yellow Bus Lines that traverse the Davao-Cotabato route. The Al Khobar--which is reportedly composed of former Muslim rebels who have since turned to banditry--set off bombs when a bus firm refuses to give in to their demands conveyed through anonymous letters or phone calls.

Prior to the bombing, a Metro Shuttle bus had also been hit by an IED explosion in the same bus terminal in Digos City on 24 July this year. A woman bomber--believed to be a member of the Al-Khobar group--who also boarded the ill-fated bus a few kilometers away from the terminal, was reportedly behind the explosion.

As investigations continue, Tagum City Mayor Rey Uy, whose family owns the Metro Shuttle Bus company, said that three days before the bus bombing, unidentified men demanded \$10,000 from his bus firm and \$1,000 every month as protection money. The Mayor said the men also threatened to bomb his buses if he would not pay up. Also in August, a Metro Shuttle official said a group--which reportedly identified itself as the Al Khobar--has demanded \$1,000 a month in extortion money, threatening attacks if it was not paid.

Previous reports have indicated that Al Khobar is linked with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which is currently engaged in fierce fighting against government troops following the breakdown of peace negotiations between the secessionist group and the Philippine government. To note, on 27 February this year, Musali Calo, an alleged member of the Al-Khobar group who was arrested in Central Mindanao, claimed that the group is led by Zabide Abdul alias Commander Beds of the MILF 105<sup>th</sup> base command. However, Calo--who claimed responsibility over the bombings of National Transmission towers in months prior to his arrest--said that the MILF as an organization has nothing to do with Al-Khobar's bombings and extortion activities. Meanwhile, the MILF denied the group is involved in Al Khobar's activities, saying it would conduct an investigation on the allegations.

Reports have likewise indicated the possible involvement of the communist New People's Army (NPA), which has been staging extortion attacks in recent months against installations of mining, plantation and telecommunication firms that refuse to pay so called "revolutionary taxes."



### **State Response**

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has ordered security forces to hunt down the perpetrators of the bomb explosion. Military troops have established checkpoints along possible escape routes of the suspects. Authorities also pushed for the deployment of plainclothes bus marshals alongside strict enforcement of the directive which bans bus operators to pick up passengers in the middle of their route. Meanwhile, Davao City has been placed on red alert status following the bomb explosion. Prior to the bombing, officials had warned the public to brace for possible attacks by renegade guerillas of the MILF.

### **Analysis**

The bombing occurred as authorities were on alert to thwart possible spillover of the fighting between the military and the MILF rebels in Central Mindanao. However, the Digos bus bombing--which is believed to be the handiwork of the extortion group Al-Khobar--is not seen as a direct result of the breakdown of the peace talks between the Philippine government and the MILF. The Al-Khobar has been found to have carried out similar bus bombings to extort money from bus firms since early last year. The demand for sums of money, which the owner of the bus company claimed to have received prior to the attack, indicate that the bombing is mostly an act of extortion rather than an activity driven by political or ideological motivations.

Nonetheless, reports indicating Al Khobar operating under the direction or with the support and consent of the Muslim secessionist MILF or the communist CPP/NPA should not be discounted. It may be that Al Khobar maintains links with the MILF since most of the group's members were former Muslim rebels known to the MILF. However, Al Khobar may not necessarily operate under the MILF's direction. Reports that the group is taking instructions from commanders of the communist group CPP/NPA likewise remain to be validated. What is certain, however, is that an extortion group like Al Khobar is taking advantage of the current unstable security situation in Mindanao to step up their activities.