

Saturday, December 19, 1998 Published at 13:52 GMT

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Philippine Muslim leader killed



The group Abu Sayya has been blamed for Ipil massacre in 1995

Police in the Philippines say the leader of a Muslim extremist group has been killed in a police raid on Basilan Island in the south of the country.

The dead man has been identified as Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani, the founder and chief of the Abu Sayyaf (Bearer of the Sword) group. He was the country's most wanted man with a reward of 1.5m pesos (\$37,500) on his head.

"This is one of the biggest accomplishments of our men, including the military, who have been very supportive in our operations," General Roberto Lastimoso, head of the Philippine National Police, told reporters.

In the past, there have been several false reports of Mr Janjalani's death, but on Friday his body was positively identified by Basilan province governor Akbar Wahab.

Police say they have been trailing Mr Janjalani for a very long time before elite policemen raided his hideout in Lamitan.

General Lastimoso said he had ordered his men to follow up the raid with an offensive against the rest of the group.

"The Abu Sayyaf has lost their leader and this is the best time to strike," the general said.

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A former teacher from a Muslim-Christian family on Basilan, Mr Janjalani, 39, studied theology and Arabic in Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia during the 1980s. He returned to the Philippines around 1990 and began preaching, attracting disillusioned young Muslims.

His group, Abu Sayyaf, which officials said has ties to Libya, has been blamed for numerous violent attacks on Christian communities in the southern Philippines, including the April 1995 raid on the town of Ipil that left more than 50 people dead.

The military also believes that the group has links with international extremists, such as Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, thought to be behind the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and Ramzi Yousef, the convicted mastermind of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York.

The Manila Government has estimated that Abu Sayyaf has hundreds of members, equipped with recoilless guns, anti-tank weapons and mortars. The military has said the weapons were apparently bought with foreign funds.

Increased security

Mr Janjalani's followers also vowed vengeance.

"We promised in front of his corpse that we will avenge him," a follower said, adding that Mr Janjalani's death "does not mean that we will be dispersed".

He also said that the group will continue its fight for a separate Islamic state in Mindanao, home of the largely Christian nation's Muslim minority.

In response to the threats, military and police forces were placed on high alert in the southern Philippines on Saturday.

"We have doubled security patrols in the region. We are co-ordinating with the police," Lieutenant General Angelo Reyes, chief of the southern military command said.

Security has also been bolstered at the US and British embassies in Manila following the US-led air strikes on Iraq amid fears of retaliation, possibly from the Abu Sayyaf, police sources said.

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