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INTERNATIONAL NEWS

## Philippine rebels seize 100; 15 killed

**Militants attack airport and set off blasts in southern city**

Filipino medics attend to wounded hostage victim in a military hospital in Zamboanga city, southern Philippines, on Wednesday.



Reuters

MSNBC STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

JOLO, Philippines, May 3 — The southern Philippines was rocked by a wave of violence on Wednesday, with Islamic rebels seizing 100 hostages and launching grenades at an airport while bomb explosions in a major port city killed up to 15.

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**Ned Colt**  
NBC CORRESPONDENT

**AUDIO** [Colt reports on the latest in the hostage drama.](#)

**AUDIO** [Colt on the unclear demands of the hostage takers.](#)

ON SOUTHERN Jolo island, at least two men among 21 mostly foreign hostages snatched from a Malaysian diving resort on Easter Sunday by Muslim rebels were wounded during a five-hour gun battle with troops on Tuesday night, the chief negotiator seeking their release said.

A spokesman for the Abu Sayyaf (Father of the Sword) militia earlier told radio and TV stations a male Caucasian hostage was killed by a stray bullet and a Caucasian woman died of a heart attack. He did not identify the hostages.

A local government official however said all 21 hostages were alive. Nur Misuari, a former rebel chief designated by Manila to negotiate their release, told reporters two hostages were wounded during Tuesday's gun battle but both were alive.

Ned Colt, who covers Asia for NBC News, said that there had been an evolution in the kidnappers' demands during a series of hostage-takings and violence in the past few months. Their exact goal remained unclear on Wednesday, but previously the kidnappers sought the release of three Muslim terrorists jailed in the United States, among them the mastermind behind the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Ahmed Yousef. The kidnappers have also said they want more autonomy in the Philippines and money.

Former rebel chief Misuari said an emissary of his was in the rebel camp discussing the guerrillas' demands when the gun battle started on Wednesday. "He escaped unscathed and he said that this was the best he could say — when he left, two were wounded," Misuari said. Their identities were not known.

The 21 hostages are 10 Malaysians, three Germans, two French nationals, two South Africans, two Finns, one Lebanese and a Filipina.

### THIRD HOSTAGE DRAMA

The violence now wracking the southern Philippines is the worst in the country since Muslim separatists agreed to a peace deal with the government in 1996.

'I think before night fall everything will be resolved.'

— GENERAL  
DIOMEDIO  
VILLANUEVA

Chief of the Philippine Southern  
Command

In a third hostage drama on Basilan island, four hostages were killed Wednesday when government troops stumbled upon Abu Sayyaf rebels trying to cross a stream with their captives in the southern Philippine province of Basilan, officials said.

Troops screamed at the hostages to get down, then opened fire. Fifteen other hostages of the original 27 were rescued, including children and teachers. Military sources said still others were taken by the fleeing guerrillas.

In Basilan, officials said the dead included a priest, two female teachers and a male teacher. It was unclear who killed them.

Another priest who saw the four bodies at a funeral home later in the day said they had been shot at close range in the head. Several had apparently been hacked on their bodies and arms, the Rev. Martin Jumoad said.

Five of the 15 rescued hostages were wounded, one seriously, military officials said. They were taken by helicopter to a military hospital.

The 27 Basilan hostages, who included 22 children, were among about 50 seized by Abu Sayyaf rebels on March 20 for use as human shields. The rebels later released some captives, but they claimed two weeks ago to have beheaded two adults, triggering a military assault on their stronghold.

### **WORST VIOLENCE SINCE 1996**

The violence now wracking the southern Philippines is the worst in the country since Muslim separatists agreed to a peace deal with the government in 1996.

Two groups — the Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) — rejected the peace deal and have continued their decades-long fight for Muslim self-rule in the south of the mainly Roman Catholic Philippines.

MILF guerrillas hit the airport and an adjacent military camp near the city of Cotabato, 600 miles southwest of Manila, with grenades on Wednesday but caused no serious damage or casualties, said Maj. Gen. Gregorio Camiling, the senior officer in the area.

Rebel units also took over large stretches of a highway near Cotabato and were holding 100 people from vehicles they had seized, radio reports said.

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But an MILF spokesman said the group did not intend to hold on to the hostages. "An order has already been issued directing these commanders to release right away these civilians," spokesman Eid Kabalu said. "We are looking into their safety. We are concerned about their safety."

Radio station DZMM in Manila said 15 people were killed in four blasts in General Santos, a largely Christian city 120 miles further south from Cotabato. The blasts occurred within minutes of each other around lunchtime at city hall, a public market and the nearby port, it said.

Witnesses said only four people were killed and the local Red Cross put the toll at three dead and 33 injured. It was not known if the blasts were linked to the MILF-led fighting, but Kabalu said local MILF commanders may have ordered the attack in response to directives from the rebel leadership to prepare for hostilities.

## MINDANAO ISLAND



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Cotabato and General Santos are on the main Mindanao island, home to most of the five million Muslims in the country's 74 million population.

The MILF pulled out of peace talks with the government last week after claiming troops had violated a shaky cease-fire.

The Jolo island drama was the highest profile hostage situation. Some 2,000 troops surrounded the rebel lair there and gun battles erupted in the area on Tuesday night amid attempts at negotiations through intermediaries.

Two soldiers were killed and six wounded in the fighting, local officials said. They said the Abu Sayyaf suffered an undetermined number of casualties.

Reporters were barred from going near the rebel camp on Wednesday, but soldiers manning checkpoints were extremely tense. A wounded soldier was brought down to Jolo town on Wednesday, indicating some fighting may still be going on.

The Jolo hostages were last seen by reporters who accompanied a doctor taken in to see them on Monday. The captives pleaded for a quick release, saying they were sick, hungry and frightened.

“We love you — please put pressure on our embassy to help,” South Africans Monique and Callie Strydom wrote in a letter smuggled out to their families by Enrique Soriano from Singapore’s Straits Times newspaper.

“We are very sorry we are not with you. Will hopefully see you soon,” said the letter. It was published by the newspaper on Wednesday.

*NBC’s Ned Colt and The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.*



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