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MULTIMEDIA:

Philippine military begins assault on Muslim rebels

April 22, 2000

Web posted at: 2:45 PM HKT (0645 GMT)

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines (AP) -- The military launched an assault Saturday in the southern Philippines against Muslim extremists who claimed to have beheaded two of 29 hostages abducted a month ago.

"A rescue operation is going on," said chief of staff Gen. Angelo Reyes.

There was no immediate report on the condition of the hostages, who have been held since March 20. The group, Abu Sayyaf, said its members beheaded two male teachers Wednesday because the government had ignored its demands, which include the freeing of Arab terrorists such as the man behind the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.

Reyes said the decision to attack the rebel camp in Basilan province was made by a provincial crisis management committee that has handled the hostage negotiations.

"We don't have reports of rebel casualties, and on our part, we don't have any casualty," Reyes said. He refused to give other details, saying it would jeopardize the operation.

Radio station DXRC said the rebels reported that the military pounded their camp in Basilan province with Howitzer cannons and mortars.

The radio station, which had been off the air because of Easter holidays, made a special 2 1/2 hour broadcast early Saturday to report the military assault.

The station said residents of Maluso town could hear explosions from nearby Sumisip, where the rebel camp is located. It said four helicopter gunships were seen over the area.

The group has demanded the release of Ramzi Yousef, mastermind of the World Trade Center bombing, and Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, accused of conspiring to blow up New York City landmarks. They also demanded the release of two Abu Sayyaf members being held in a Basilan jail.

The demands were rejected by the Philippine government and by the U.S. Embassy.

The rebels originally seized more than 50 people from two schools in Basilan on March 20 for use as human shields after attacking an army outpost. Some of the hostages have since been freed.

The Abu Sayyaf is the smaller but more radical of two Muslim groups fighting

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for an independent Islamic state in the southern Philippines. It has been blamed for numerous attacks on Christians, including the abduction of foreign missionaries.

The U.S. State Department has included the Abu Sayyaf in a list of 28 foreign groups that threaten Americans at home or abroad.

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