

Death toll rises to 21 in airport bombing

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The death toll from a bomb blast at the Davao airport in the southern Philippines rose to 21 today as authorities tightened security in key installations across the country.

Davao Mayor Rodrigo Duterte said several suspects had been arrested and interrogated over the explosion outside the Davao International Airport yesterday that also left more than 150 people injured.

The explosive pulverised an unguarded shed outside the Davao airport terminal amid the backdrop of increased Muslim guerrilla activity in the region ahead of a planned deployment of US anti-terror troops.

It was the deadliest terrorist attack in recent years in the country's south, where Muslim groups are seeking an independent state and a small number of US troops are providing counter-terrorism training to Filipino troops.

"I am sad to say that one of the four Americans injured in the explosion has died in hospital," US embassy spokesman Ronald Post said without naming any of them.

But "there were no US military personnel" in the injured or death list, Manila-based US military adviser Captain Dennis Williams said.

President Gloria Arroyo denounced the bombing and said police have "several men in custody being interrogated for committing these murders".

The bombing "is a brazen act of terrorism that will not go unpunished," she said in a statement. "I assure you justice will be done."

In another blast outside a government clinic in the nearby city of Tagum just after the airport attack, three people were wounded, officials said.

Police earlier reported a third bomb blast at a bus depot in Davao but later retracted it. They said the bus terminal had merely received a bomb threat but that bomb squads found no explosives.

The authorities shut down Davao airport as a precaution, while other airports in Mindanao stepped up security.

Relatively peaceful Davao has 1.2 million people and is the largest city of the southern Philippines.

"I heard a tremendous explosion, then I saw people sprawling on the ground," said Bobby Cabanban, who was parking his taxi about five metres away.

"It's a very powerful bomb. The waiting shed literally exploded," Davao vice-mayor Luis Bongoyan said of the late afternoon airport blast.

"We have suspects and we are running after them," Mindanao police chief Edgardo Aglipay said without elaborating. Aglipay told GMA television the bombers had used the chemical trinitrotoluene (TNT) and had concealed it in a rucksack that they left in the shed.

Television footage showed a long line of hospital beds full of bloodied patients being attended to by medical staff. A long line of gurneys were lined up at the courtyard to wheel in the arriving casualties.

An hour after the airport blast, ambulances and other emergency vehicles were still picking up casualties from the street outside the airport, cordoned off by yellow police tape and dozens of soldiers armed with assault rifles.

Flag-carrier Philippine Airlines (PAL) suspended flights to Davao until further notice. The last of three PAL flights to Davao for the day was recalled back to Manila about 35 minutes before touchdown, an airline statement said.

Arroyo sent Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes and Interior Secretary Jose Lina to Davao to oversee the government response to the bombing, the second against an airport in Mindanao in less than two weeks.

Separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels blamed in the car bombing of Cotabato airport on February 20 that killed one person and

left six others injured, condemned the Davao bombing and denied responsibility.

AFP

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/03/05/1046540222480.html>