

Philippine massacre suspect blames Muslim rebels for carnage

A scion of a powerful political family detained for allegedly masterminding a gruesome massacre of 57 civilians in the southern Philippines Friday blamed Muslim separatist rebels for the carnage.

Andal Ampatuan Junior maintained his innocence concerning Monday's grisly attack on mostly women and journalists in a hilly village in Ampatuan town in Maguindanao province, 930 km south of Manila.

'We know that the MILF (Moro Islamic Liberation Front) is a terrorist group, especially under its leader Umbra Kato. They are terrorists,' he said in a television interview from the cell where he is being detained at the National Bureau of Investigation.

'I am innocent. I voluntarily came here to show to all of you that I am not hiding,' he added. 'I am innocent of the crime they are accusing me of.'

But MILF spokesman Eid Kabalu denied that his group was involved in the mass murder.

'We will not dignify his accusations,' he said. 'We will let the police investigators do their job and find out the culprits behind the crime.'

Investigators have not linked the rebel group to the massacre.

Andal Junior, whose family is a very close ally of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, surrendered Thursday to presidential aide Jesus Dureza. Police immediately filed a criminal complaint of multiple murder against him.

According to witnesses, Andal Junior allegedly led a group of about 100 heavily armed men that stopped a convoy of a political rival and diverted them to the area where they were killed.

The victims, six of whom were beheaded and shot multiple times at close range, were on their way to file the certificate of candidacy of Buluan town Vice Mayor Esmael Mangudadatu for Maguindanao governor in next year's elections.

They included Mangudadatu's wife, two sisters, two human rights lawyers and at least 27 local journalists who were covering the event.

Mangudadatu's candidacy would pit him against Andal Junior.

Filipinos are due to vote for president, vice president, senators, congressmen and local officials in May. Elections in the country have traditionally been marred by violence despite additional gun restrictions imposed during the campaign and polling periods.

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