

MANILA, Philippines - Defense and military officials are taking seriously some claims that foreign terrorists have managed to enter the country. The officials also reiterated the country's readiness to quell any terror plot.

"We will still have to verify these reports. We cannot discount the possibility but we will have to see if we have enough information regarding that," Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin told reporters on the sidelines of the DND's 71st anniversary celebrations yesterday. "Everything is being taken seriously," he added.

Gazmin was reacting to reports quoting Rommel Banlaoi, executive director of Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research, as saying that 10 suspected foreign terrorists have sneaked into the country and are now talking with armed groups in Mindanao.

Retired police intelligence officer Chief Superintendent Rodolfo Mendoza also claimed that there is an imminent terror threat in the Philippines and he himself had received reports about it.

Mendoza was also quoted as saying that combined forces of the Abu Sayyaf, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front Special Operations Group, and Jemaah Islamiyah would stage bombings.

But Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) spokesman Brig. Gen. Jose Mabanta Jr. reiterated that the country is not facing imminent threats. He also claimed that Banlaoi and Mendoza may not have enough sources on the ground.

"There is no report that there is immediate imminent terror plot in the country," Mabanta said in a press briefing.

"Professor Banlaoi is a known (academician) specializing on terrorism. However, he is not an intelligence operative. He does not have under his jurisdiction any intelligence operative," he added.

"Mendoza used to be a topnotch police intelligence man during his heydays. He's no longer in service, as such he no longer has intelligence operatives to give him updates. He may not be in the position to give assessment," Mabanta said.

"The threat is always there. You cannot tell that there is no threat because the state has enemies," Gazmin said.

"We are prepared for threats both from local and foreign terrorists. We are tightening the security of crowded places like ports, airports, seaports, and bus stations," he added.

Mabanta said those who have reports about terror plots should get in touch with security forces and not give the information to other entities, which may only misuse such information.

Last month, two explosive packages from Yemen were seized in Dubai and England, triggering concerns that international terror cell al-Qaeda may be planning a series of new attacks.

The packages were addressed to Chicago-area synagogues and packed aboard cargo jets.

The al-Qaeda in Yemen, which has about 300 members, is reportedly a key source of recruits.

The US, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and France later issued separate warnings against traveling to the Philippines, citing "imminent terror attacks," particularly in Metro Manila.

Terrorist named

Sources said, however, that anti-terror agents have doubled their efforts in tracking down Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operative Zulkifli bin Hir also known as Marwan, reportedly the mastermind in a terror plot in the country.

Considered a bomb expert, Marwan was reportedly sighted last month in Sulu and in Basilan. Along with more than 30 JI colleagues, Marwan has been in operation in the country from his base in Central Mindanao even before 2000.

The presence of a regional terrorist network with direct links to al-Qaeda was established following the capture by government forces of Camp Abubakar, the main camp of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Central Mindanao during the Estrada administration.

Marwan, who has a \$5-million bounty on his head, reportedly trains MILF and Abu Sayyaf members in bomb making.

“Most of our efforts now are directed towards him. We are tracking him down. He could be the key to all these renewed terror threats,” said a senior anti-terror official who declined to be named.

The MILF’s so-called 114th Base Command operates within the area of Al Barka where Marwan was reportedly last seen.

The source said Marwan blended easily with villagers.

“He speaks almost all of the local dialects in Mindanao and he looks more a Filipino than a foreigner,” he said. With Jaime Laude