

At least 10 Philippines marines were wounded in a clash early Friday as government forces continue to pursue Abu Sayyaf militants holding hostages in Sulu.

Brig. General Alan Arrojado, the joint military task force commander in Sulu province - one of two Abu Sayyaf strongholds - said in a statement that marines joining other government troops in the hunt for the Al-Qaeda linked group encountered some 300 gunmen near Mt. Awak in the village of Latih, Patikul town around 6 a.m.

He said troops shelled Abu Sayyaf positions with 81mm mortars during an hour-long gunbattle.

A military report from Western Mindanao Command based in Zamboanga City said the Abu Sayyaf group that clashed with the marines were led by Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, Muamar Askali, Almuktar Suddung, Namiel Ahajari, Basaron Arok, all followers of sub-commander Yasser Igasan.

Casualties on the Abu Sayyaf side are still to be determined.

GMA News quoted another military report as saying that alleged members of Jemaah Islamiyah – Amin Bacu alias Abu Jihad/Khalid, Muhamad Mahmud, Muhamad Alih and an unidentified man - were with the group.

The U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2014 lists Al-Qaeda's Southeast Asia-affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah alongside the Abu Sayyaf and the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines - the New People's Army — as among the "Foreign Terrorist Organizations" operating in the Philippines.

The wounded Marines have been evacuated to a Sulu hospital for treatment.

Friday's encounter came eight days after government troops attacked an Abu Sayyaf camp triggering a fierce firefight during which two hostages — both coast guard personnel — managed to escape.

The two men were kidnapped along with a village leader in Zamboanga del Norte province in May. They were taken to an Abu Sayyaf camp in Sulu and later shown blindfolded in a video with a knife held to the neck of one of them.

Military reports have said that the village leader was beheaded a few days prior to the Aug. 19 clash, in which around 20 militants were killed.

At least nine other hostages, including two Malaysians, are believed to be held in the same area.

A Dutch bird watcher kidnapped nearly three years ago is also believed to be held in Sulu by another Abu Sayyaf faction.

Since 1991, the Abu Sayyaf — armed with mostly improvised explosive devices, mortars and automatic rifles — has carried out bombings, kidnappings, assassinations and extortions in a self-determined fight for an independent Islamic province in the Philippines.

It is notorious for beheading victims after ransoms have failed to be paid for their release.

The group gained notoriety in the late 1990s and early 2000s for a daring raid on a resort on the Malaysian oceanic island of Sipadan, from where it snatched 20 tourists, mostly Europeans.