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Police say the bombers could have left Manila

Police in the Philippines have filed murder charges against three leaders of a Muslim rebel group over Saturday's bombings in the capital Manila.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) Chairman Hashim Salamat and two of his deputies were charged in absentia for involvement in the bombings, which killed 22 people and injured scores more.

Mr Salamat and his followers are believed to be hiding in the southern Philippines, where they have been fighting for a separate Muslim state on the island of Mindanao.

The MILF have denied any involvement in the attacks.

The government has already filed murder charges against Mr Salamat and more than 50 of his followers for two blasts in a shopping mall in May.



The bombers struck in five places

Guns and drugs

On Friday, the Philippine military released 14 of 18 suspects detained over the bombings.

Reports said the police were angry over Thursday's arrests by the military, which they feared may have driven the real bombers further into hiding.

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Military chief Angelo Reyes said the 18 detained were taken from a house in a mainly-Muslim district of Quezon City in co-ordination with local police.

Four of the 18 were still being investigated for possible involvement in the bombings and for possession of illegal firearms and drugs, Mr Reyes added.

Estrada trial

Nobody has claimed responsibility for the five bombs, which exploded in an elevated train, a bus terminal, an airport warehouse, a park near the United States embassy and outside a luxury hotel.

A smaller Muslim rebel group, Abu Sayyaf, has also denied any involvement.

Some opposition sources have suggested the bombings may be linked to President Joseph Estrada's impeachment trial on corruption charges.

They said the attacks could give Mr Estrada an excuse to declare martial law and remain in power.

But General Lacson ruled out any link between the bombings and the trial.

“ The [bombers] have slipped out of Manila and we are chasing them ”

Police chief Panfilo Lacson



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