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Solomon Islands: No peace in paradise

Armed militants have pledged to avoid fighting during the week-long Commonwealth Youth Ministers' Conference which begins in Solomon Islands on Monday. They should avoid fighting not just for a week, not just for foreign visitors but for their own families and villages, Amnesty International said today.

The gathering of 200 delegates from 50 nations in the capital of Honiara comes at time of increased violence in a conflict that has been largely ignored by the international community and left at least 60 people dead and up to 20,000 displaced since October 1998.

Last week, gunshots were fired at a truck carrying school children. The body of a decapitated man was found in a Honiara market and the head of another was put on display at a road block.

The Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) has forced an estimated 20,000 people on Guadalcanal, mostly settlers from neighbouring Malaita province, to abandon their homes, jobs and properties and seek refuge with relatives in besieged Honiara or on other islands. Both IFM and the rival paramilitary Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) last week controlled police movements into areas east of the capital near the international airport.

The MEF is seeking revenge for gruesome killings, loss of face and property at the hands of impoverished IMF militants from Guadalcanal island. The IFM militants, as they are now generally called, include hundreds of child soldiers, some from families forced to provide recruits.

The MEF, illegally armed and supported by members of the predominantly Malaitan police service, is using violence to dictate terms in a fragile peace process initiated last year by Commonwealth Special Envoy, former Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka. Rabuka hopes to chair further negotiations on Saturday 27 May. Paramilitaries recently set up a food, fuel and medical blockade stopping Red Cross and other aid supplies to rural areas.

Unarmed members of a 12-strong international peace monitoring force were searched at gun point last week by MEF fighters engaged in a stand-off with Guadalcanal militants near the international airport. It is not clear how many fighters were killed or wounded in the area.

"All sides to the ethnic conflict on Guadalcanal, both rival armed groups and police forces, must accept responsibility for human rights abuses. By threatening, killing or brutalizing civilians, armed groups are only raising the stakes for present and future efforts towards peace," the organization said.

"If recent promising peace efforts are to make progress, the authorities -- particularly the police service -- will need urgent international support to halt the spiral of violence and end the suffering and human rights abuses being committed by all parties to the conflict."

There is encouraging good will among influential parties and a thirst for peace, justice and a normal life among suffering civilians, but without supporting neutral security forces, improved capacity and training, the police cannot regain control over law and order.

Amnesty International calls on all parties involved in the armed conflict to respect international human rights standards. Acknowledging

and addressing human rights abuses by all parties is an essential ingredient in peace and reconciliation moves.

"We appeal to all militant leaders to stop 'payback' killings and discourage inflammatory rumours. Torturing or killing civilians and making women and children suffer is a grave abuse of human rights and international humanitarian law," Amnesty International said.

Background

Violent ethnic tension in the southwest Pacific nation's main island of Guadalcanal, resulting mainly from unresolved land disputes between local villagers and settlers who arrived after World War II, has recently escalated. Since late 1998, armed groups of unemployed youths, angry about perceived government inaction in addressing their grievances, resorted to arms, atrocities and intimidation to drive out of rural Guadalcanal virtually all settlers from other islands. Thousands of displaced families have since abandoned their homes, mostly via the capital Honiara on the north coast, now a Malaitan enclave within militant controlled territory. Hundreds of homes have been burned down or looted.

Hopes for a return to some normality were shattered in January when police allowed the newly-formed paramilitary Malaitan Eagle Force (MEF) to raid a police armoury. No arrests were made. Since then, frequent MEF operations, sporadic shootings and revenge attacks against civilians targeted for their ethnicity, have added pressure on a government struggling to address grievances and demands for compensation on both sides of the conflict.

Guadalcanal militants, criminal opportunists and Malaitan vigilante groups have been responsible for serious human rights abuses, including hostage-taking, killings, torture, rape, looting and burning down village

homes. Police routinely fail to bring perpetrators of such abuses to justice, and permit both armed groups to continue their operations with virtually no risk of arrest. The police are either biased, fear reprisals or are unable to take action.

Some elements in the Malaitan-dominated police service have also committed human rights violations in the context of anti-militant operations, including indiscriminate firing into villages occupied by women and children and ill-treatment of child suspects. Allegations of rape by police officers and extrajudicial executions have not been investigated by the authorities.

Amnesty International condemns abuses committed by militant and paramilitary groups, its stand however does not carry a connotation of recognition, or condemnation of that group, nor does it constitute a comment on the legitimacy of its goals or political program.

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