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Solomon Islands: Civilians at risk from fallout of coup attempt

The armed takeover attempt in Solomon Islands exposes the risks to civilians of leaving human rights abuses unresolved, Amnesty International said today.

Monday's coup attempt in Solomon Islands highlights the failure of national authorities and the international community to address with determination serious human rights abuses on the main island of Guadalcanal.

"Given the apparent breakdown of law and order, it is more important than ever to send in the promised additional peace monitors to help protect human rights," Amnesty International said.

Despite 18 months of ethnic violence and intensive Commonwealth-led peace efforts, no one has been held to account for dozens of killings, kidnappings and the displacement of over 20,000 people.

"Families of at least 60 people killed or missing are still awaiting justice. School children have come under gun fire while their peers have been pressed into becoming child soldiers," Amnesty International said.

Civilians continue to be at risk of becoming victims of forced displacement and indiscriminate attacks. Most police armouries have now been raided by paramilitary and militant groups fighting an ethnic conflict over unresolved social and economic rights.

Amnesty International has repeatedly appealed to all parties to the conflict to safeguard unarmed villagers and respect international humanitarian and human rights standards.

With Solomon Islands police officers reportedly implicated in this coup attempt, the capacity of neutral peace monitoring forces already in Guadalcanal must be strengthened as soon as possible to help protect unarmed civilians vulnerable in possible reprisal attacks.

Background

In October 1998, armed militant groups and criminal opportunists have 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. Some have been arrested and a police officer has stood trial for murder, but no inquest has been held into any killings of unarmed villagers.

A paramilitary group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), is seeking revenge for gruesome killings, loss of face and property at the hands of impoverished militant groups from Guadalcanal island, now referred to as Isatabu Freedom Movement. The IFM has at times included scores of child soldiers, some from families pressed to provide recruits.

The MEF, illegally armed and supported by members of the predominantly Malaitan police service, has been using violence since February 2000 to dictate terms in a fragile peace process initiated last year by Commonwealth Special Envoy, former Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

Amnesty International believes that acknowledging and addressing human rights abuses by all parties is an essential ingredient, if peace and reconciliation moves are to be successful. ENDS.../

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