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Fiji: Harassment of government critics

The arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of Fiji-born Australian academic Professor Brij Lal by the Fijian military on 4 November 2009 is the latest example of the ongoing crackdown against any criticism of the regime and peaceful opposition activities.

Professor Lal is among scores of others in the last few months who have been targeted merely for speaking out against government policies. The ongoing repression of any peaceful dissent is unacceptable and the government should immediately put an end to this practice.

Professor Lal, who was on a research visit to Fiji, had commented to overseas media on the consequences of the expulsion of Australian and New Zealand diplomats by the military-led regime in Fiji on 3 November.

Following his statements, soldiers took Lal from his family home in Suva, the capital, to the army camp in Nabua, four miles from Suva city. A senior army officer interrogated him, kept him in a dark cell for an hour, and verbally abused, spat at and otherwise humiliated him. He was told that if he did not leave the country within 24 hours, he would be taken back to the army camp and killed.

Lal has since left Fiji and arrived in Australia on 5 November.

Peceli Kinivuwai, the national director of the Soqosoqo ni Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) Party and a regular critic of the military-led government, was also detained and harassed at the army camp in Suva for commenting to overseas media about the expulsion of the diplomats. Kinivuwai was held overnight and released on 5 November.

The actions of the military in detaining and harassing Lal and Kinivuwai, is indicative of the deteriorating human rights situation in the country. In a report titled *Paradise Lost*, published in September 2009, Amnesty International documents a catalogue of human rights violations perpetrated by the Fijian authorities since the abrogation of the constitution; the sacking of the entire judiciary; and the enforcement of martial law through the Public Emergency Regulations in April 2009.

Background

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama expelled the Australian and New Zealand High Commissioners from the country on 3 November, after accusing their governments of interfering with the Fijian judiciary by placing travel bans on judges who either have been appointed or are about to be appointed by the regime. Bainimarama had alleged that Australian authorities had denied transit visas to Sri Lankan judges appointed to the judiciary and warned the judges against joining the bench in Fiji. The Australian authorities have rejected these allegations and maintain that the Sri Lankan judges had withdrawn their applications for transit through Australia and chose to travel via a different route.

The Fijian government had blamed New Zealand for interference with its judiciary when it had allegedly denied a visa to High Court Judge Anjala Wati and her daughter who were seeking urgent medical attention in New Zealand in October. However, the New Zealand immigration

authorities allowed Justice Wati and family members to travel to New Zealand on humanitarian grounds on 26 October 2009.

The governments of Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America have imposed travel bans against the members of the military led-regime in Fiji and their families and those who have taken up appointments in government departments, government controlled companies, and the judiciary.

To read Paradise Lost: A Tale of Ongoing Human Rights Violations, click here:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA18/002/2009/en/5da2ce7b-de57-4778-af80-03632b33a322/asa180022009en.html>

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