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Amnesty International warns of deteriorating human rights situation in Fiji

An Amnesty International expert who has just completed a fact-finding mission to Fiji warns that the human rights situation in the country is getting worse by the day and the civilian population is living in fear as a result of draconian measures implemented by the military regime.

Apolosi Bose, Amnesty International's Pacific Researcher, was in Fiji before the abrogation of the constitution on April 10. While there, he interviewed a wide range of people, including lawyers, judicial officers, consular officials, journalists and human rights defenders.

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the volatile situation in Fiji, and is calling for the immediate restoration of the constitution, an independent judiciary and the rule of law.

Amnesty International condemns the censorship of media and detention of journalists, severe limitations on freedom of association, threats to human rights defenders and critics of the regime, and new "public emergency" regulations which protect police and military personnel from being held responsible for their actions even when their conduct results in death or injury of a person.

"The human rights situation in Fiji is getting worse by the day," said Apolosi Bose. "What is developing is a culture of extreme fear and intimidation. The rule of law must be restored in Fiji immediately and the independence of the judiciary respected to ensure people's rights to freedom of expression and association."

"There is a very strong military and police presence on the streets, particularly around strategic locations such as government offices, and in the nation's newsrooms. That is a constant and intimidating reminder that the new military regime will not tolerate dissent and will follow through on the warnings it has issued to critics."

Further to the crackdown on journalists and any critics of the military or the interim government, it is now believed that the regime is monitoring email traffic and blogs as an additional means of suppressing any criticism.

"As a result, people are being forced to self-censor and important human rights groups in Fiji are unable to go about their work properly," said Apolosi Bose. "There has been a major chilling effect on a once-robust NGO and human rights defender community."

"In the absence of a free press to hold the military to account for their actions and a judiciary to provide a balance of power, the work of these human rights organisations is crucial. But they are being crippled by repression. With no-one to stand up on behalf of the abused and the vulnerable, there is a real risk of further

grave human rights abuses occurring against civilians.”

Fiji has taken a sharp turn away from democracy following the abrogation of the constitution and the subsequent sacking of all judicial officers and all constitutionally appointed office-holders. Elections have been deferred for five years and martial law has been declared for a period of 30 days, during which time journalists have been forbidden from writing anything negative about Fiji or about the military regime.

Judges, lawyers and judicial officers have been blocked since 14 April from entering court buildings and a number of judges and judicial officers, including the Director of Public Prosecutions and the head of the Fiji Law Society, have been placed under house-arrest.

“Except for what the military want them to hear, the people of Fiji have no access to information about what is happening in their country,” said Apolosi Bose. “There is a real sense of confusion because people lack the information they need to make decisions in their daily lives.”