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## **Fiji: Systematic human rights violations after military crackdown**

The deteriorating human rights situation in Fiji after the military crackdown which began in April 2009 demands international action, particularly from China, now one of Fiji's biggest foreign donors, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

Based on Amnesty International's research in Fiji during the crackdown, the report, *Fiji: Paradise Lost*, documents a litany of repressive tactics used by the interim military government to stifle any protests and intimidate its critics. These include beatings, arbitrary arrests and detention, harassment of human rights defenders, and severe limitations on the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, opinion, and association.

"Security forces in Fiji have become increasingly menacing towards people who oppose the regime, including journalists and human rights defenders," said Apolosi Bose, Amnesty International's Pacific Researcher. "Fiji is now caught in a downward spiral of human rights violations and repression. Only concerted international pressure can break this cycle."

Amnesty International is calling on the military-led regime to repeal the Public Emergency Regulations (PER) imposed on 10 April, when then president Ratu Josefa Iloilo abrogated Fiji's constitution and reappointed Commodore Frank Bainimarama as prime minister.

Under the PER, Fiji's military and security forces retain absolute control over the country's population; and soldiers and police enjoy complete immunity from prosecution for their actions, including serious violations of human rights.

The Amnesty International report documents a pattern of government interference in the judiciary, severe censorship of the media and the harassment and arrests of government critics.

"The ongoing harassment and arbitrary detention of journalists, lawyers, clergy, community leaders and critics by the authorities under the broad and sweeping provisions of the PER are tactics used to suppress any form of dissent," said Bose.

Amnesty International called on Fiji's international donors and investors to press the government to return to the rule of law. In particular, China, which has massively increased its financial assistance to Fiji since the 2006 coup, should use its influence to resolve the constitutional crisis.

"China has long claimed that it doesn't interfere in other country's affairs, but, in Fiji, China has clearly favoured one side of a long political dispute—and in the process ignored the country's human rights situation," said Donna Guest, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

- From 10 April until 20 May 2009, the police, military and other government officials arrested approximately 40 people, including journalists. Although all have subsequently been released, the authorities are using short-term arrests and intimidation as a tactic to suppress freedom of expression.
- Police arrested 60 year old politician Ilesia Duvuloco and five other men under the PER and detained them on 17 April for four days for distributing pamphlets highly critical of the leaders of the interim government. Military officers beat the six men and forced them to undertake military-type drills.

Note to editors:

On 5 December 2006, following a protracted public stand-off between the Laisenia Qarase-led multi party government and the military, the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama executed a military coup d'état against Qarase's government.

One of the direct consequences of the military takeover in 2006 was extensive human rights violations by the security forces. Prominent political figures including critics of the military government were arbitrarily detained and subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment by the military. In February 2007, the military admitted to taking more than 1,100 people to the military barracks, who were then beaten, otherwise treated inhumanely and forced to do military type drills such as running and being forced to carry heavy loads.

Fiji's coup culture began in May 1987 when then Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka overthrew the Indian dominated government of the Labour and National Federation Party Coalition. The Rabuka coup and subsequent moves by the interim government set up afterwards saw the rise of ethno-nationalism, culminating in a constitution which preserved political leadership and other constitutional positions for indigenous Fijians only. These changes marginalised the Indian community, descendants of those who had been brought from India by the then British colonial government.

Apolosi Bose, Amnesty International's Pacific Researcher and author of the report, was in Fiji at the time the constitution was abrogated on 10 April. He conducted wide-ranging research and interviewed more than 80 people including representatives of various organizations and members of the public. He and Amnesty International colleagues have continued to monitor the situation closely and to maintain records of human rights abuses in Fiji as they are reported.