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Solomon Islands: Women in fear as rapists go unchecked

"I was 14 years old then. Mr. N. [member of Police Joint Operation] came one night at around 10 pm, pointed a gun at me and ordered me to follow him to see the other men. They were already expecting me. They forced me to go and get leaves for betelnut [a popular local drug], then questioned me and told me they would send for the commander to see me. The Commander was Mr [...], he pointed his gun at me and raped me. I suffered pain and bleeding and had no [access to] medical care." 16-year-old schoolgirl from Guadalcanal

Hundreds of cases of rape, torture and other violence in the Solomon Islands remain unresolved because victims fear for their safety if they report such crimes to the police. Women and girls have been left traumatized by their experience during the years of civil war in the South Pacific island nation.

A report by Amnesty International, *Solomon Islands: Women confronting violence*, reveals the full extent and consequences of violence used against women during the country's five-year conflict. For example, of 55 women living on the Weathercoast who were interviewed by the organization in April 2004, 19 were raped by forces occupying or raiding their village. Thirteen of those raped were teenage girls, the youngest was aged eleven.

"Those responsible for violence against women -- whether police, members of armed groups, or private individuals -- have rarely been brought to justice for these crimes. To our knowledge, very few of the rape cases detailed in the report have resulted in a prosecution," said Heinz Schurmann-Zeggel, Pacific Researcher at Amnesty International.

"Witnesses and victims seldom filed complaints, often because there was no opportunity to do so or because they feared revenge. In cases of rape, male relatives often discouraged women from reporting cases to police or from co-operating with prosecutors," explained Dr Schurmann-Zeggel.

Even now that the conflict is over, violence against women continues -- domestic violence in particular. Nearly 200 rapes were reported in the six months to June, a number described as *"an appalling record"* by the Solomon Islands Commissioner of Police. The police lack funds to train officers in responding to such violence, while the government has failed to provide even essential police equipment needs.

Discrimination against women exacerbates the violence. Women are poorly represented in the police, law and politics. Too often foreign aid to rebuild the country boosts men's economic opportunities while doing little to address the needs of women.

"Women in the Solomon Islands have been suffering a double invisibility -- first as victims of the conflict, now as potential contributors towards restoring peace and human rights," said Dr Schurmann-Zeggel.

Amnesty International is calling on the Solomon Islands government to:

- Draft and implement a National Policy on Violence against Women;
- Seek international assistance to ensure the policy meets international standards and is implemented accordingly;
- Set up a police team specialising in violence against women and children that should co-operate with health authorities;
- Involve women on an equal footing with men in development initiatives.

To see the report, *Solomon Islands: Women confronting violence*, please go to <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa430012004>

Public Document

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