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Indonesia: Amnesty International calls for restraint as threat of violence mounts in Papua

Amnesty International today warned that the risk of violence was mounting across Papua (Irian Jaya) on the eve of 1st December pro-independence demonstrations in the province.

"Any moves by the security forces to use excessive force, including bullets and beatings, to break up protests tomorrow risks inflaming an already tense situation," Amnesty International said. "Restraint must be the watchword of the day,"

The authorities have increased their military presence in the region over recent months, heightening fears that attempts to hold pro-independence demonstrations, in particular flag-raising ceremonies, will be met with a military crackdown. In an apparent show of force, a convoy of military and police personnel reportedly moved through the Papuan capital, Jayapura today, heightening a sense of fear among local residents.

Tensions have also increased this week with the arrest of three members of the pro-independence Papuan Presidium Council, a local pro-independence body. The three have reportedly been detained on suspicion of subversion. It is unclear whether or not they have been charged. There are fears that these arrests mark a further step in a campaign to silence the expression of pro-independence sentiment in Papua.

Both pro-independence and pro-integration militia groups are believed to be active in the region, armed with bows and arrows and

other traditional weapons. Some pro-independence militia members have reportedly vowed to fight back if there is a crackdown by the security forces tomorrow. It is feared that any outbreak of violence could lead to further human rights abuses.

The demonstrations planned for tomorrow follow similar protests over recent years in Papua, in particular ceremonies involving the raising of a Papuan flag, a popular form of protest. The frequently heavy-handed response of the security forces to such demonstrations has been marked by serious human rights violations, including unlawful killings, torture and arbitrary detentions.

"Such an approach bears the hallmarks of the policies of the past," Amnesty International said. "Peaceful dialogue based on respect for fundamental human rights must form the foundations of any future settlement to Papua's disputed political status."

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