

19 December 2000

AI Index ASA 43/013/2000 - News Service Nr. 239

Solomon Islands: A black day for human rights

The passing in parliament today of a blanket amnesty law for virtually all crimes and human rights abuses committed during the two-year ethnic conflict may encourage future political torturers and killers to expect to get away with atrocities, Amnesty International warned.

"Impunity for the torture, rape and killing of civilians, including children, is an outrage and contributes nothing to lasting peace or reconciliation," a spokesman said from the human rights organization's International Secretariat in London. "Sweeping amnesties haven't brought peace in other conflicts and are likely to cast a deep shadow on the future of human rights in Solomon Islands."

The amnesty law, rushed through parliament in 48-hours, reportedly provides for immunity from criminal and civilian prosecution to all members of armed political groups and their civilian "advisors". The wide scope of the law and the speed of its passing raises questions about whether parliament was actually free to discuss its implications.

While apparently still subject to future constitutional amendments, the law implements the most controversial clause (the amnesty clause) in the Townsville Peace Agreement -- signed in October in Australia by Guadalcanal's Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) and the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF).

Given the serious and far-reaching implications of the law, Amnesty International is urging the Solomon Islands government to

reconsider its scope and the need for truth, justice and redress in all laws addressing human rights abuses.

Background

Both the IFM and MEF are responsible for thousands of serious human rights violations for which no-one has been brought to justice. The conflict began in 1998 when groups -- which later called themselves the IFM -- terrorized ethnic Malaitan settlers on the main island of Guadalcanal. More than 100 people have since been killed and an estimated 30,000 internally displaced. Last year, Malaitan vigilante groups, supported by some police officers, retaliated, and in June 2000 the MEF ousted the government in a coup. Following the coup, the MEF forced parliament under threat of "all out war" to elect a new Prime Minister, and many members of parliament have since appeared fearful of attending debates or opposing MEF demands.

Escalating violence against civilians after the coup subsided after Australia and New Zealand facilitated negotiations which led to the Townsville Peace Agreement. Celebrated in the capital, Honiara, as a turning point in the conflict, the agreement provides rewards for members and supporters of armed groups but lacks provisions for the investigation and prosecution of crimes, including crimes against humanity and other serious human rights abuses. Civil society groups had complained about being excluded from the peace process. Tight deadlines for the peace negotiations in Townsville led delegations to agree on the amnesty clause, the major sticking point, only hours before the signing ceremony.

Implementation of priority provisions in the peace accord has been slow, mainly due to armed groups being reluctant to hand in at least 1,000 guns stolen from police armouries. According to the police, more than 100 officers who joined the MEF after the coup have been

reinstated in the police service without being held accountable for apparent human rights abuses they may have committed as MEF members.

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