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Fiji: Arbitrary detentions and beatings must stop

The severe beating, amounting to torture, of a government critic and the reported detention and beating of several trade unionists and politicians in the last week indicate that the human rights situation in Fiji is worsening, Amnesty International said today.

The military detained politician Sam Speight at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks outside of Suva, the capital, on 21 February. They repeatedly beat him until he lost consciousness. He was released on 24 February. Speight was a cabinet minister in the deposed government of Laisenia Qarase.

The military continually denied knowledge of Speight's whereabouts to his wife and other family members during his three day detention.

Speight has since gone to Australia to receive urgently needed medical attention.

Human rights activists who visited the military barracks to obtain more information on Speight during his detention said that the military threatened them and warned them to keep quiet or they themselves would be beaten.

Speight's detention and torture followed the recent arrest of a number of trade unionists and politicians who were also threatened and beaten by military officers at the Queen Elizabeth Barracks. Those who were beaten up include trade unionists Felix Anthony and Maika Namudu and two politicians. They have subsequently been released, but there are continuing fears for their safety.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned for the safety of activists and government critics as another crackdown begins in the country.

The government continues to use the Public Emergency Regulations (PER) as a tool of repression. The PER was enacted in April 2009 in the wake of the government's abrogation of the Constitution, and greatly restricts freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Ongoing censorship of the media and threats, intimidation and attacks against government critics continue to evoke a climate of fear in Fiji.

Amnesty International calls on the Fiji government to:

- Immediately stop the arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment of critics and activists;
- Immediately initiate an independent impartial investigation into the arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment of Sam Speight and others, and ensure that those military officers suspected of involvement in these acts, irrespective of rank, are brought to justice;
- Immediately suspend the Public Emergency Regulations;
- End the censorship of the media;
- Ensure that freedoms of expression and peaceful assembly are respected.

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