AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: ASA 18/3566/2016
02 March 2016

Fiji: Human rights must be at the core of Cyclone Winston's response

On 20 and 21 February Category 5 Severe Tropical Cyclone Winston cut a path of destruction across Fiji. The cyclone is estimated to be one of the most severe ever to hit the South Pacific. The cyclone particularly impacted the northern coast of Fiji's largest main island, Viti Levu. To date 43 people have been confirmed dead due to the cyclone. Additionally, 62 000 people are displaced and currently in 900 evacuation centres.[1] Almost two weeks on from the cyclone, the situation in Fiji remains dire.

Amnesty International welcomes the prompt response and collaboration of the governments of Fiji, Australia, New Zealand and France, UN agencies, and international development organisations in providing post-disaster assistance to people in Fiji.

Equitable distribution of aid without discrimination, must be the priority for those assisting in relief efforts. In particular, gender equality and addressing the unique needs of women and children, people with disabilities and other marginalised groups must be an integral part of response plans.

Amnesty International urges that a human rights based approach is at the core of the response to the cyclone. With so many people displaced and living in evacuation centres, the likelihood of further human rights abuses is increased. Physical and sexual abuse increases at times of natural disasters, and one case of sexual assualt in a Savusavu evactuation centre has already been reported.[2]

In the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, longstanding international human rights principles are a necessity and not an optional luxury that can only be considered once order has been restored. Ensuring the protection of human rights is essential in times of crisis.

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[1] wwwreliefweb.int+OCHA%20TC%20Winston%20Situation%20Report%206.pdf
[2] http://fijivillage.com/news/Man-allegedly-sexually-assaults-cyclone-evacuee-s5r29k/

Amnesty International urges the Government of Fiji and others working on relief efforts to ensure:

- Respect for human rights, particularly those rights which are non-derogable in times of emergencies (including the right to life and the right to be free from torture).

- Transparency and accountability are at the forefront of plans and actions so that survivors are guaranteed the assistance they need and that such assistance is delivered effectively, equitably, and without discrimination;

- Protection and empowerment of women and marginalised groups such as children, the elderly and persons with disabilities;

- Treatment of those displaced is in full compliance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement[3] and other international standards, which guarantee protection to displaced people.

[3] http://www.unhcr.org/43ce1cff2.html