

## news.amnesty feature

### Solomon Islands: Something to celebrate

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When women's organisations in the Solomon Islands (population 523,000) celebrated International Women's Day on 8 March this year, they actually had a range of positive changes to celebrate. In the year and a half since the end of the internal conflict in the Pacific island group, which led to widespread human rights abuses including rape and torture, the authorities have initiated a number of measures to improve the situation in the country.

Major changes have been made to the Royal Solomon Islands Police (RSIP), such as the creation of the country's first Sexual Assault Unit. The unit's first strategic plan incorporates recommendations made in an Amnesty International report on violence against women in the Solomon Islands published last year (*Solomon Islands: Women confronting violence*, AI Index: ASA 43/001/2004). A female Detective Sergeant with many years' experience investigating sexual assault and violence in the family was appointed to set up the unit. The number of female police officers in general continues to increase, up from fifty in 1992 to at least 92 (out of about 1,050) today. The RSIP has also developed a gender policy and have advertised a post for an equal employment office within the police service.

The past 18 months have not only seen changes in policy and make-up of the police, however. The RSIP has been active in addressing gender-based crime and gender equality. Officers accused of sexual assault have been prosecuted, such as the Police Constable charged on 12 March this year. He has been accused of raping a young girl who was under police care and protection as a victim of sexual abuse within her own family.

The country's first purpose-built shelter for women and children who are victims of family violence was opened on 6 March and expects its first resident clients from 1 May. The centre offers short-term accommodation for up to 20 girls and women (or mothers with small children) as well as counselling space. It is known as the Christian Care Centre, in memory of its late founder, Sister Lilian of the (Anglican) Church of Melanesia who, with her fellow Sisters, cared for many women survivors of abuse.

The Centre was built with New Zealand and Guadalcanal Provincial Government support. However, it is located outside the capital and still lacks a dedicated vehicle that would allow counsellors to visit survivors of abuse and allow residents to attend medical or legal appointments. There is also no radio to call police in case of unwanted visitors, or to arrange such appointments. At present, staff must walk two hours to Honiara due to the lack of communications and transport.

That the shelter has been established is an excellent initiative. But such gaps in security are a matter of concern, as a shelter needs to be more than simply a place of residence for women in danger. It must be a place of safety, for which secure funding, specialist staff, as well as safe movement for residents are required.

Progress has also been made on mechanisms to address a broad range of human rights. Following a visit by Human Rights Commissioners from Fiji and New Zealand and by the Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, Prime Minister Alan Kemakeza announced the establishment of a national Human Rights Commission. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has decided to place a National Human Rights Legal Officer in Honiara, the capital city of the Solomon Islands. This is the first such appointment to be made in the region.

In January, the Islands' High Court substantially increased its capacity to hold criminal trials. Two new court rooms have been opened and two additional judges, as well as support staff, have been appointed. These developments allow the court to address conflict-related human rights violations more effectively. In addition, the Chief Justice has appointed a Court Information Officer and launched a law and order awareness campaign ("Law Blo lumi"). This will allow survivors and villagers affected by abuses to learn about their rights and the processes for bringing those responsible to justice, something which they have long been demanding.

However, much of this progress depends on donor funding and lacks sustainable government resources as well as long-term donor support. Amnesty International therefore calls upon the Solomon Islands Government to commit substantially more assistance and long term planning to make the changes truly effective and sustainable and to translate government promises into reality.

The biggest concern now is that identified root causes of the conflict need to be addressed. Inequalities in rural development, economic and educational opportunities have been particularly acute, hampering schooling and skills training for village girls and women and their active participation in the economy, the justice system and in decision-making processes. Women who know their rights are more likely to benefit from the kind of improvements described.

Media information on human rights and other issues has improved, but rural areas remain disadvantaged in their access to media, training and information that is available in urban centres. To truly change the situation in the Solomon Islands and to shore up and develop the positive changes that have been made, a much wider audience, particularly women's groups, need to be involved and the authorities have a responsibility to involve them.