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Fiji: Impunity unacceptable

Three years after a violent coup, torturers still go unpunished in Fiji. The rule of law and human rights are sacrificed for political considerations, Amnesty International said today.

"Fiji's military, praised for peace-keeping at home and in UN missions, is still preventing the prosecution of soldiers who tortured at least four suspected rebels to death during a coup-related mutiny," the human rights organization added.

Civilian and military justice systems remain compromised by their failure to act on evidence of torture and extrajudicial executions, and by the handling of politically sensitive cases in which prosecutors or witnesses fail to turn up, allowing suspects to walk free.

"Leaders who cooperated with coup rebels remain in high political office while perpetrators of racist and other violence, mainly against Indo-Fijians, have been let off the hook," Amnesty International said.

"Such selective use of the rule of law will not inspire confidence in Fiji's justice system, nor help its efforts to restore community peace and political stability," Amnesty International said.

"Recent treason charges against the Vice-President and four others for their role in the coup are belated steps in the right direction, but other participants in coup-related human rights violations should not be allowed to walk free."

"All Fijian citizens, indigenous and Indian, have been suffering from the effects of the coup. They deserve a chance to build a future for their children, based on respect for human dignity, racial equality and the rule of law."

Last year's abolition of the death penalty in criminal law has been overshadowed by uncertainty about whether it applies to an ongoing coup trial. The last person sentenced to death, coup leader George Speight, had his sentence commuted in March 2002 after pleading guilty, thus preventing evidence on officials implicated in the coup from being presented in court. Members of the government are campaigning for George Speight's release from prison while the military has been pressured to go soft on coup rebels facing court martials.

Amnesty International calls on the Fiji authorities to vigorously address impunity at all levels, and to build foundations against future political unrest with the equal application of all human rights in Fiji's

Constitution.

Background

In the months following the coup of 19 May 2000 that overthrew a democratically elected government, at least 15 people were killed and thousands of civilians were displaced or lost their livelihood. More than 1500 people were arrested - many for racial violence, but most have since been released. To date, only a minority of the perpetrators have successfully been brought to justice.

On 2 November 2000, members of the army's elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit tried to stage a mutiny in support of the coup within the military headquarters at Queen Elizabeth Barracks in the capital, Suva.

The mutiny, during which three soldiers died, was put down and many members of the elite unit were arrested. Suspected rebel prisoners were severely beaten by soldiers after they were arrested. Four of the prisoners died as a result of the beatings, and at least six others were treated in hospital for injuries sustained after their arrest. Family members, lawyers and non-governmental organizations were refused access to the prisoners for many weeks.

By May 2001, the Fiji police had gathered evidence to lay murder charges against soldiers suspected of beating prisoners to death; however, the military prevented the police from interviewing and prosecuting the suspects of these killings.

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