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Bougainville: Peace talks must address human rights

As Bougainvillean leaders gather in New Zealand for peace talks with the aim of ending the nine-year civil war in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) province of Bougainville, Amnesty International appeals to leaders on all sides to ensure that human rights forms a substantial part of their discussion.

“Without serious efforts to address human rights issues, abuses by both the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) and the armed opposition are likely to continue,” Amnesty International said today.

Various efforts at negotiating a peaceful solution to the Bougainville crisis since 1989 have failed to address the human rights situation in a substantive way. Human rights violations such as unlawful killings, “disappearances”, ill-treatment and arbitrary detentions continue also because the conditions which facilitate them prevail. These conditions include a lack of access for journalists and human rights monitors, and impunity for the PNGDF -- the government-backed paramilitary Bougainvillean Resistance Forces -- and the armed opposition, the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA).

“Immediate access must be granted to the province for United Nations and international non-governmental human rights monitors and journalists -- a move which could go a long way to ending the cycle of violations,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Bougainville leaders to urge the PNG Government to immediately allow full and permanent access to Bougainville for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Clear signals must be sent to all troops serving in the province that they must act within framework of international human rights and humanitarian law and a strict chain of command. The government-backed Resistance Forces -- responsible for many unlawful killings and “disappearances” -- must be either regularised or disbanded.

Impunity for both the PNGDF and the BRA must be addressed if confidence and trust are to be engendered. Human rights violations which have occurred in the province since 1988 should be independently and impartially investigated. PNG’s proposed National Commission on Human Rights should have an explicit mandate to cover human rights violations on Bougainville.

Amnesty International is urging all sides to the conflict to take advantage of the fact that talks are occurring and that there is a formation of a new national government in PNG.

“Serious and detailed discussions of how human rights can be improved on Bougainville could go a long way towards restoring confidence and stability on the island and an end to the cycle of human rights abuses,” the human rights organization said.

Background

The talks in New Zealand are between representatives of the Bougainville Transitional Government -- a transitional authority for the province of Bougainville established after an agreement between

Bougainvillean leaders and the national PNG Government -- leaders of the BRA, and its political wing, the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG). They are being hosted by the New Zealand Government. PNG's National Government -- still forming after recent elections -- is not taking part formally although several members of the country's national parliament for the area of Bougainville are believed to be attending.

For further information about Amnesty International's concerns on Bougainville, see *Bougainville: The Forgotten Human Rights Tragedy*, 26 February 1997, AI Index ASA 34/01/97.