

AI INDEX: ASA 43/02/99

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Solomon Islands: Amnesty International mission reports on serious human rights abuses

(Honiara, Solomon Islands, 30 September 1999) -- A 20-day Amnesty International mission to Guadalcanal and Malaita Provinces has documented serious human rights abuses in the context of the country's worst ever ethnic unrest.

At least 10 people are known to have been killed and 14 people have "disappeared", but the real figures may be much higher. Several hundred houses have either been burnt down or looted.

"Scared villagers and displaced families have given horrific accounts of indiscriminate police shooting and cruel killings by armed groups known as 'militants'", Dr Heinz Schürmann-Zeggel, Amnesty International's Australia-Pacific Researcher, said at a press conference in Honiara today.

Hundreds of armed men, calling themselves the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army or Isatambu Freedom Movement, have been terrorizing mostly Malaitan settlers on Guadalcanal since September 1998. More than 32,000 people, predominantly from Malaita Province, have since left their homes and villages on Guadalcanal.

The police have generally responded with restraint, but have also been facing considerable difficulties in responding to villagers' calls for help. Amnesty International has met with senior police and the government, calling for independent investigations of alleged police use of excessive force.

"Recent United Nations, Commonwealth and International Committee of the Red Cross visits to Solomon Islands have focused on peace efforts and much needed humanitarian relief," Amnesty International said. "Yet there are also hundreds of untold stories of human rights abuses crying out for acknowledgement and redress."

The human rights organization calls on all "militant" groups to immediately release surviving hostages and reveal the names of those people who "disappeared" or died.

During the mission, Amnesty International delegates visited dozens of displaced families in remote locations in both Malaita and Guadalcanal Provinces. The organization reported that there were some signs of government efforts to address the situation, including new approaches by police officers to win back trust among frightened villagers.

The organization urges the Government of Solomon Islands, and in particular senior police officers, to speed up the community policing initiative and ensure that human rights protection and justice are an integral part of any political settlement.

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