

AI INDEX: ASA 43/03/99

December 23, 1999

Solomon Islands: Amnesty International calls for immediate release of hostages

Following reports that two special police constables were taken hostage on Guadalcanal island yesterday by unidentified men, Amnesty International today called upon all parties to the ethnic conflict on the island to release people abducted and held against their will.

"There are no excuses for abduction, ill-treatment or torture. People committing human rights abuses in Guadalcanal should not imagine that the international community is not watching their actions," the human rights organization said.

Yesterday's incident comes a month after the killing of a Guadalcanal man and the shooting of another, in apparent reprisals by one ethnic group against another for its year-long campaign to drive non-indigenous people from the island.

Amnesty International called for the immediate release, without conditions, of all people held unlawfully against their will. Bodies and names of hostages who had died should be identified. Alleged human rights violations by police officers should be independently investigated and anyone found responsible should be brought to justice, the organisation said.

"There can be no lasting peace and reconciliation without the protection of basic human rights. Acknowledging and addressing human rights abuses by all those involved in ethnic unrest is not political generosity, but an essential precondition for the success of peace and reconciliation efforts," the human rights organisation pointed out.

Background

An international peace monitoring force has been operating in Guadalcanal, the main island of Solomon Islands, since October to help the government end an ethnic dispute which erupted into violence in September 1998.

Since then, ethnic conflict has forced an estimated 32,000 settlers on the main island of Guadalcanal to leave their homes and villages, after being intimidated by armed groups who reportedly abducted around 14 civilians. While the police has generally responded with restraint, at least seven people were reportedly shot dead by police this year without their killing being properly and independently investigated.

ENDS.../

For more information, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>