

Solomon Islands: Human rights abuses erode peace talks

Members of rival armed groups and the police responsible for unlawful killings, torture and abductions must be brought to justice if current peace efforts are to have a lasting effect, Amnesty International said today releasing a new report.

“If human rights abuses continue to remain unpunished, there is little hope for the restoration of peace, law and order, or for justice for victims and their families,” the human rights organization said.

“Fear of reprisals is feeding a culture of silence about well-known atrocities,” Amnesty International added. “Many aggrieved families do not know where to find the bodies of relatives killed in the conflict, or cannot risk searching for them.”

A coup in June, supported by many paramilitary police officers, has led to increased fighting on Guadalcanal island between rival ethnic groups, widespread lawlessness and a rapidly deteriorating human rights situation. The coup was led by the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF - settlers from Malaita island) which is fighting Guadalcanal island ‘militants’ known as the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM).

“Ethnic Malaitan police officers defecting to the MEF have disempowered the police service, stripping it of guns, cars and equipment. Criminals have been let out of prisons, and civilians are at the mercy of undisciplined MEF or IFM supporters and criminal opportunists taking advantage of the situation,” Amnesty International said.

Since the conflict began, 20,000 - 30,000 people have fled their homes, at least 100 people are estimated to have been killed, and tens of thousands are cut off from basic food supplies, medical and other relief. In recent months, hundreds of homes have been burnt down or looted and thousands of people abandoned their homes to seek shelter with relatives, on remote islands or in hill forests. Peace initiatives are currently gathering momentum but have yet to end the violence.

“People live in fear of looting, rape or ‘payback’ killings by armed political groups and criminal opportunists. Due to the lack of police protection, women and ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable and have no way of seeking redress,” Amnesty International said.

Police have been unable or unwilling to bring perpetrators of such abuses to justice, and armed political groups have continued their operations with virtually no risk of arrest. Both rival groups are said to have bases where they reportedly torture captured combatants.

In mid-August, at least four mutilated bodies were found buried in a shallow grave near the capital, among them 18-year-old student John Bosco, a Guadalcanal islander evacuated from a school shelled in June by a police patrol boat. He was abducted early July and allegedly brutally beaten by an armed group from Malaita island because of his ethnicity. His killing followed the reported torture and killing of two Malaitans by the IFM in June.

The current national and international efforts towards a peace agreement and rebuilding the police service must address this ongoing impunity. Plans to grant an amnesty to armed groups must not prevent the authorities from establishing the truth and bringing to justice those responsible for atrocities like torture or the killing of civilians.

“Peace and reconciliation cannot last if killers and torturers can be sure they will never be held to account.”

Background

Violent ethnic tension has recently escalated in the southwest Pacific nation’s main island of Guadalcanal, resulting mainly from unresolved social and land disputes between local villagers and settlers who arrived mostly from Malaita island after World War II. Fighting is concentrated at the scene of the 1942-43 Battle of Guadalcanal between American and Japanese forces after which a Malaitan-dominated capital was built on Guadalcanal.

Since late 1998, armed groups of unemployed Guadalcanal youths, angry about perceived government inaction in addressing their grievances, resorted to arms, atrocities and intimidation to drive out of rural Guadalcanal virtually all settlers from other islands. Thousands of displaced Malaitan families abandoned their homes, mostly via the capital Honiara on the Guadalcanal north coast, now a Malaitan enclave within IFM-controlled territory.

Since January 2000, the MEF has retaliated. In June the MEF forced former Prime Minister Ulufa’alu to resign and parliament to form a new government.

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For more information or a copy of the report "Solomon Islands: A Forgotten conflict", please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or Sydney, Australia +612 9217 7640

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