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PAPUA NEW GUINEA: GOVERNMENT YET AGAIN TURNS A BLIND EYE TO LATEST KILLINGS ON ISLAND OF BOUGAINVILLE

Serious human rights violations on the island of Bougainville have yet again been met with a resounding silence from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government, as more civilians were reportedly killed last week by the security forces, Amnesty International said today.

“The government has consistently failed to respond adequately to killings, “disappearances” and torture by its forces since the eight-year conflict began,” the organization said.

“This lack of action by the government has allowed the security forces to continue committing grave human rights violations in the knowledge that they are unlikely to be held accountable for their actions.”

In the most recent in a series of killings of civilians by the PNG Defence Force (PNGDF) and the government-backed paramilitary Resistance Forces, nine civilians were reportedly killed and five wounded in a mortar attack by the PNGDF on a church in Malapita, South Bougainville in what Amnesty International believes may have been indiscriminate killings by the PNGDF.

According to press reports, including in the *Australian* newspaper, the mortar fell on the church during a morning prayer session, and all of those killed are believed to be civilians. The attack was in an area under the control of the armed secessionist Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) but there appear to have been no military objectives in the vicinity.

PNGDF's Chief of Staff, Colonel Jack Tuat, commenting on the reports, gave no commitment that the incident would be investigated and there does not appear to have been any reaction yet from the government. Verification of the exact circumstances of the attack has been hampered by lack of access for independent observers.

“Unless the authorities allow access to Bougainville for independent human rights observers and unless mechanisms are set up for investigating any allegations of violations and holding those responsible to account, the people of Bougainville will continue to be defenceless against further killings, “disappearances”, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment,” Amnesty International said.

Throughout the conflict human rights violations by the security forces and abuses by the armed secessionist BRA have been facilitated by the lack of international and domestic scrutiny, as journalists and human rights monitors have been barred from the island. This is despite recommendations from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions for greater access to the island.

With only one exception, none of the dozens of reports of extrajudicial killings and “disappearances” in the past two years have been addressed by the government. Members of the security forces alleged to have committed violations have not been investigated or prosecuted, and many remain stationed on the island.

In November, in an unprecedented move, the PNG Government invited a Sri Lankan judge to conduct a coroner’s inquiry into the death of former Bougainville Premier, Theodore Miriung, in October. Last week, the judge released his preliminary findings that PNGDF soldiers and members of the Resistance Forces were responsible for the killing.

Amnesty International welcomed the willingness of the government to establish an independent coroner’s inquiry into Theodore Miriung’s death, but actions taken by the authorities since the preliminary findings do not suggest that this inquiry reflects a consistent change of government policy to ensure independent and full investigations of all human rights violations on Bougainville.

Soldiers who are alleged to have been involved in the killing are still stationed in the area where the killing took place, despite a recommendation by the coroner’s inquiry that they be removed.

“Any attempt to further independently investigate the killing of Theodore Miriung will undoubtedly be hampered by the continuing presence of soldiers alleged to have been involved,” Amnesty International said. “The army unit implicated in the killings must be removed from the area so that eyewitnesses will be able to more freely provide information to the continuing investigation.”
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For further information or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International Press Officer on mobile phone number: 0468-670247 (or +44 468-670247 if outside the UK).