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Solomon Islands: School hit as risk for civilians heightens

As fighting escalates east of Honiara, Solomon Islands, Amnesty International is appealing to all sides of the armed conflict to respect principles of international humanitarian law, in particular to protect the lives of civilians.

The organization was seriously concerned about what appears to have been indiscriminate shelling of a village from a police patrol boat seized by paramilitaries.

"Villagers have reported being absolutely terrified. A school was hit Wednesday morning, with the roof of one of the buildings reportedly shelled. All children had previously been evacuated, but there were still civilians in the area, including women," Amnesty International's South Pacific Researcher Heinz Schurmann-Zeggel said.

"We are continuing to verify reports about casualties and other details of this incident, but so far have been unable to identify any military target in the village at the time of the shelling."

The fighting lasted at least four hours in farming and bushland on the main island of Guadalcanal, in an area east of the international airport recently controlled by Guadalcanal 'militants'. A plane chartered to evacuate a senior European Union delegation was reportedly hit by gunfire when trying to take off. No-one was injured. Attempts to evacuate Chinese farmers and local staff on Tuesday failed because of heavy fighting, expected to flare up at any time.

The Commander of 20 unarmed peace monitors from Fiji and Vanuatu told Amnesty International's South Pacific Researcher his men were preparing to leave at the earliest opportunity.

"Given the apparent participation of Police Field Force officers in the paramilitary operation against Guadalcanal militants, the departure of the peace monitors would be a sorry loss for the protection of human rights," Schurmann-Zeggel said.

Background

The armed takeover attempt of the government in Solomon Islands by the paramilitary Malaita Eagle Force, assisted by at least 100 officers of the Malaitan-dominated police force, has put civilians at serious risk. Monday's coup attempt in Solomon Islands highlights the failure of national authorities and the international community to address with determination serious human rights abuses in the context of an escalating ethnic conflict.

Despite 18 months of ethnic violence and intensive Commonwealth-led peace efforts, no one has been held to account for dozens of killings, kidnappings and the displacement of over 20,000 people.

Families of at least 60 people killed or missing are still awaiting justice. A vehicle taking children to school has recently come under gun fire from paramilitaries, while their peers have been pressed into becoming child soldiers for Guadalcanal militants. Both sides claim to be fighting to protect their land on Guadalcanal.

The Malaita Eagle Force, illegally armed and supported by members of the police service even before Monday's coup, has been using violence since February 2000 to influence a peace process initiated last year by Commonwealth Special Envoy, former Fijian Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka.

Civilians continue to be at risk of becoming victims of forced displacement and indiscriminate attacks. Most police armouries have now been raided by paramilitary and militant groups fighting an ethnic conflict over unresolved human rights abuses, as well as social and economic rights.

Amnesty International, which visited both Guadalcanal and Malaita in September, has repeatedly appealed to all parties to the conflict to safeguard unarmed villagers and respect international humanitarian and human rights standards.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW