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Fear for safety

14 July 2000

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Patients and staff at rural clinics on Guadalcanal island

Armed groups from Malaita island have twice this week killed patients in clinics on the main island of Guadalcanal where their opponents in the Solomon Islands' ethnic conflict have been treated. Patients and staff of the clinics, particularly in rural areas, are in grave danger.

While the population of rural Guadalcanal is more than 90% indigenous Guadalcanalese, the capital, Honiara, is dominated by settlers from the neighbouring island of Malaita. In October 1998 indigenous Guadalcanalese armed groups began terrorizing Malaitan settlers in rural areas, causing at least 20,000 people to flee their homes. A Malaitan armed group, the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF), together with rogue elements of paramilitary police units, staged a coup in June this year and forced a change of government, complaining that the previous government had failed to organize redress for Malaitan loss of life and property. The MEF now controls the capital.

On 14 July, gunmen in MEF and paramilitary police uniforms, moving round the coast in two speedboats, first fired indiscriminately at the huts of the coastal village of Aruligo, and then went to Visale, in the northwest of Guadalcanal. There they opened fire on staff and patients at the Visale clinic who were trying to escape from them, killing an old man and a teenage boy. The shooting reportedly damaged vital Red Cross medical supplies. The gunmen stole the clinic's solar-powered radio, which was the area's main communication link with the Red Cross and the capital, which is cut off from rural Guadalcanal by MEF roadblocks.

Fighters from the MEF's ethnic rivals, the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM), injured in shoot-outs with the joint MEF/police force, have recently sought medical treatment at Visale clinic and reportedly used the clinic radio for military purposes.

On 10 July three masked men armed with shotguns forced their way into a surgical ward in Honiara's Central Hospital, and shot dead two 18- and 20-year-old IFM patients. Hospital staff believe the killers were members of the joint police/MEF force. An MEF spokesman denied responsibility. Later that day, the Prime Minister promised increased security for hospital staff and patients, but did not mention rural clinics.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Until the outbreak of armed ethnic violence between the IFM and Malaitans in October 1998, an estimated 40,000 settlers from Malaita island lived across northern Guadalcanal, but mostly in the capital, Honiara. They dominated the government, civil service and police, and held a majority of paid jobs on the island.

During the past 20 months, more than 100 people have been killed in a conflict over unresolved land, development and justice issues. The police force is no longer functioning, and Solomon Islands has no army. Relatives of about 20 Malaitan families are missing, believed abducted and killed by the IFM.

In recent months, armed Malaitan groups associated with the MEF have killed dozens of civilians and so-called IFM 'militants' in revenge for earlier IFM or splinter group attacks on unarmed Malaitan people and property. During the 5 June coup, the MEF seized police weapons, speedboats, vehicles and other equipment, and recently used these to launch "Operation Eagle Storm" against the IFM. They have used a police patrol boat at least once in attacks in which civilian targets have been hit.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- appealing to the Solomon Islands government to ensure the safety of patients and staff at all rural clinics on Guadalcanal, including wounded IFM fighters, and if necessary to seek international assistance in bringing to justice those responsible for the killings at Honiara hospital and Visale clinic.

APPEALS TO:

The Hon. Mannaseh Sogavare MP
Prime Minister
Office of the Prime Minister
PO Box G1
Honiara,
Solomon Islands (South Pacific)

Telegrams: Prime Minister, Solomon Islands

Fax: + 677 26088/25470

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Solomon Islands, Australia or New Zealand accredited to your country. (Australia and New Zealand have been at the forefront of recent peace initiatives)

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 25 August 2000.