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MEDIA ADVISORY

VANUATU (SOUTHWEST PACIFIC)

Dangerous prison conditions prompt Amnesty International report

As military and police officers are facing criminal charges in Vanuatu for allegedly beating and kicking prisoners during mass arrests under a state of emergency, appalling and dangerous prison conditions are revealed in a major report launched by Amnesty International today.

The report, which welcomes Vanuatu's swift action to bring to justice some 20 military and police officers accused of the "intentional assault" of at least 16 prisoners, includes

- # Details of the extremely poor conditions in the country's prisons. Overcrowding, earthquake damage and rain water seepage have made prisons in the capital, Port Vila, a dangerous place, and prison guards struggle to provide the bare necessities of life. Male prisoners were recently evacuated for safety reasons from the main prison while a woman continued to be held there for about a month. An Amnesty International delegate visiting Port Vila shortly after a state of emergency ended in February found evidence that several hundred people had been temporarily held in a prison built for 63.

- # welcoming the quick action on allegations that military and police officers abused emergency powers during mass arrests to beat up prisoners, one of whom nearly died in hospital from severe internal injuries. The criminal prosecution of suspected human rights abusers sends an important signal that ill-treatment of prisoners must not be tolerated, that police and prison officers are not above the law, and that national emergencies do not excuse officers' taking the law into their own hands. The arrests of some 500 suspects had followed widespread rioting and looting in Port Vila on 12 January, triggered by an Ombudsman's report on official corruption. Court proceedings against the officers charged are adjourned to 7 December 1998.

- # 20 recommendations to improve prison conditions, prisoner health care and complaints mechanisms, urging the Vanuatu Government to seek assistance for their implementation from the international community, particularly from its main aid donors, including Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Japan and New Zealand. ...ENDS/

For further details consult the full report *Vanuatu: No safe place for prisoners*, AI Index ASA 44/01/98. An E-mail version is available on request from amnestyis@amnesty.org.

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