



Covering events from January - December 2000

## SOLOMON ISLANDS

### Solomon Islands

**Head of state:** Queen Elizabeth II, represented by John Ini Lapli

**Head of government:** Manasseh Sogavare (replaced Bartholomew Ulufa'alu in June)

**Capital:** Honiara

**Population:** 0.4 million

**Official languages:** Solomon Islands Pidgin, English

**Death penalty:** abolitionist for all crimes

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**The conflict between rival armed political groups - the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) - continued on the country's main island, Guadalcanal. Both sides committed human rights abuses against the civilian population. Scores of civilians, including women, children and other non-combatants, were abducted, ill-treated, raped and killed; these abuses were attributed to the MEF, the IFM or splinter groups. Thousands of villagers were internally displaced and deprived of medical assistance and relief supplies during an MEF blockade. The blockade was lifted following the signing of a peace accord in October.**

### Armed conflict and coup

The MEF emerged as the main armed political group representing the interests of settlers on Guadalcanal island. The settlers, from Malaita province, had been displaced in 1999 following attacks by the IFM. The MEF declared it was using military force to put pressure on the government to provide compensation for loss of life and property in Malaita during previous attacks by the IFM.

In June Malaitan paramilitary police officers led a coup and joined forces with the MEF. They raided the main police armoury, took Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu hostage and forced him to resign. Opposition leader Manasseh Sogavare was elected as the new Prime Minister after the MEF leader threatened "all out war" unless parliament elected a new Prime Minister.

Following the coup, acts of intimidation and reprisals against civilians by both groups escalated. The MEF used captured police weapons to launch a series of major assaults against IFM positions; hundreds of homes in rural areas were destroyed. Perpetrators of human rights abuses continued to enjoy impunity and a climate of lawlessness prevailed on Guadalcanal and Malaita.

## Peace talks

South Pacific government ministers and UN disarmament experts visited the country, but their reports were not made public. A series of peace talks and a cease-fire signed in August failed to halt hostilities, but growing pressure from civil society and business groups led to a peace agreement, signed on 15 October in Townsville, Australia, by members of the MEF, the IFM and the government. National and international efforts were made to implement the agreement's priority provisions, including the arrival of unarmed peace monitors from countries in the region. The peace agreement provided for, among other measures, the rehabilitation of members of armed groups, a general amnesty for all parties to the conflict, reform of the police and the reintegration into the police force of officers who had joined the MEF or IFM. The agreement made no provision for an investigation into human rights violations and abuses.

## Killings

Dozens of civilians and other non-combatants were killed; the deaths were attributed to the MEF, the IFM or splinter groups. Both parties to the conflict failed to respect the principles of international humanitarian law, which regulate the conduct of armed conflict and protect civilians. Following the coup, MEF fighters indiscriminately shelled villages east of Honiara from a police patrol boat. Displaced civilians in the Marau Sound were reportedly targeted by both the MEF and the IFM.

- In May the MEF was linked to the murder of a Guadalcanese man whose headless body was left in Honiara central market, with a note linking the murder to ongoing peace talks. His death triggered the apparently revenge killing of a Malaitan man two days later. His severed head was reportedly displayed at an IFM roadblock.
- In July gunmen suspected of belonging to the MEF shot dead two wounded IFM members as they lay in their beds in a surgical ward in the capital's Central Hospital. Days later gunmen in MEF and paramilitary police uniforms attacked a rural medical centre on Guadalcanal and opened fire on staff and patients as they tried to flee, killing an old man and a teenage boy.

## Torture/ill-treatment

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Both the MEF and the IFM reportedly tortured or ill-treated suspected members of armed political groups. Some captives were believed to have died as a result of torture, or to have been subsequently killed. Malaitans abducted by the IFM were reportedly beaten at an IFM camp where torture was reported to have been routine. Suspected Guadalcanese militants and civilians were reportedly tortured or ill-treated in MEF camps on the outskirts of Honiara and in the former Guadalcanal provincial government offices, temporarily the MEF "headquarters".

- In April the MEF reportedly abducted a Guadalcanese man who was later seen at an MEF camp, suspended by wire tied to his hands and ankles, bleeding and bearing the marks of severe beatings. His body was found several days after his abduction in a suburb of Honiara.
- In June two Malaitan men were captured by the IFM and then tortured by an IFM splinter group notorious for its use of violence. They were reported to have been paraded through villages with visible injuries before being killed and buried. In what appeared to be a reprisal attack, two

Guadalcanese men - John Bosco, an 18-year-old student in a Catholic college who had been evacuated to the capital to escape the fighting, and Walter Tavai - were abducted by MEF members in early July. John Bosco was reportedly beaten at an MEF camp before being killed and secretly buried. According to eyewitnesses, Walter Tavai was beaten unconscious and subsequently died of his injuries.

## **Other concerns**

### **Hostage-taking**

Allan Kemakeza, the brother of the Deputy Prime Minister, was held hostage by the IFM (Western Command) for 10 days in August. An IFM splinter group hijacked a Solomon Airlines aircraft in September and held the pilot hostage for two and a half weeks.

### **Peace activists and journalists**

Academics and other members of civil society who tried to engage in public debate about peace talks were threatened and attacked.

- The family of Matthew Wale, a peace activist, was robbed and his relatives were beaten by gunmen linked to the MEF.
- Several local journalists and their families were threatened by the MEF for their reports on the conflict.

### **Displaced people**

Between 7,000 and 10,000 people fled their homes in rural Guadalcanal during the year, following threats, abductions, looting and burning of their property by armed political groups. Humanitarian aid for those displaced by the conflict was intermittent. MEF blockades prevented essential supplies reaching Guadalcanese islanders. MEF and IFM members were reported to have beaten, threatened and harassed International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) staff, medical professionals and clerical and lay workers trying to carry out humanitarian work or perform their religious duties among displaced people. The leader of the ICRC delegation sustained head injuries when he was attacked by an ethnic Malaitan gunman.

### **AI country report**

- Solomon Islands: A forgotten conflict (AI Index: [ASA 43/005/2000](#))
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