

# Intimidation against settlers continues in Solomon Islands

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Far from resolving the conflict in the small Pacific nation of Solomon Islands, the Honiara Peace Accord brokered by the British Commonwealth and signed with great fanfare on June 29, has paved the way for further violence on the island of Guadalcanal against people from other areas. The Isatabu Freedom Fighters (IFF), also known as the Guadalcanal Liberation Army, which was to have disarmed under the agreement, is continuing its campaign of intimidation and terror to drive "migrants" off Guadalcanal.

On July 31, the Solomon Islands police field force shot dead four IFF members at Mount Austin just outside the capital, Honiara. The four had reportedly threatened a group of Malaitans tending their vegetable garden situated just five kilometres from the centre of Honiara. The Malaitans fled back to Honiara and reported the threats to police. When the police returned, the IFF members allegedly fired shots. The police armed with automatic weapons then shot dead the four men. The IFF spokesman claimed that two of the men killed were unarmed and were beaten to death.

On the previous day, the police launched a raid on an IFF camp in the north of Guadalcanal. They seized traditional weapons and arrested one IFF member. The day after the killings the IFF raided the Sikaina village on the Guadalcanal plains. An off-duty prison warder was beaten and kidnapped and villagers originally from Malaita were warned to leave Guadalcanal. Most of the 30 houses were ransacked and looted. One house was torched. The following day 200 villagers met and decided to abandon their homes and to flee to Honiara.

The IFF has already forced an estimated 20,000 people to flee their homes. Many have returned to the nearby island of Malaita after camping in makeshift accommodation in and around Honiara, which is still controlled by the Solomon Islands police force. At least six people had been killed prior to the incident at the

weekend.

Fiji's military strongman, Sitiveni Rabuka, who brokered the accord, has been hastily re-called to deal with the deteriorating situation. But the IFF leaders have stated that they have nothing to discuss with Rabuka and have called on him to halt police actions. Moves are also underway to establish a special contingent of police from Fiji and Vanuatu to disarm the IFF.

The Solomon Islands government has maintained a state of emergency imposed in June. The government has extensive powers of arrest, detention without trial and six-month imprisonment for causing disharmony, fear, annoyance or danger. Additional emergency powers announced at the end of June imposed unprecedented media censorship, which has provoked protests from a number of journalists' organisations internationally. The measures include two-year jail sentences for publishing anything deemed to cause racial or communal disharmony, or incite violence.

The Honiara Accord bowed to most of the IFF's demands and thus encouraged further attacks on settlers from other islands. The agreement included proposals for negotiations on the establishment of a separate Guadalcanal government, compensation for land taken over by the rapidly growing capital of Honiara, and the exclusion of people from other provinces through a ban on squatting.

The IFF leaders signed the Accord under eight conditions. They demanded the immediate "repatriation of displaced and unemployed Malaitans from our territory back to their home province". They also insisted: "While recognising that action is already being taken on our demand for State Government, we nevertheless desire a speedy conclusion of the process so as to have a new System of Government that will satisfy our purpose by Jan 1, 2000."

They restated their "total loss of confidence in the police

force and demand a total reorganisation of the force so as to bring in a new command structure headed by a Melanesian preferably from Fiji or Vanuatu but not Papua New Guinea soonest (sic). The new police force should coordinate the repatriation of Malaitans." They demanded that police stop checking vehicles, dismantle roadblocks and stop arresting IFF members.

The government has already conceded many of the IFF's demands. It has not agreed to organise the repatriation of people from other islands, but very little protection and assistance has been given to the thousands of Malaitans driven from their homes at gunpoint. The IFF is now insisting that major employers sack Malaitans from their workforce and replace them with Guadalcanal workers.

A large oil palm plantation in the west of Guadalcanal operated by Solomon Islands Plantation Limited (SIPL) was shut down in early June when the IFF drove workers away at gunpoint. The plantation, which previously generated 20 percent of the country's export income, was jointly operated by the British-owned Commonwealth Development Corporation and the Solomon Islands government until the government announced last week that it was selling its 30 percent share.

Many SIPL workers took refuge at the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education and the King George Sixth Secondary School in overcrowded conditions. This week, SIPL management, after reaching an agreement with the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers, announced that it would sack its entire workforce and repatriate them to the other islands. In a similar move, the Russell Islands Plantation Limited coconut plantation on Guadalcanal will also repatriate its workforce.

A number of Malaitan workers at the Gold Ridge gold mine, run by the Australian-owned Ross Mining NL, have fled, fearing IFF attacks. Management has stated that the workers face no danger and warned that if they did not report for work over five consecutive days they would be sacked with no entitlements.



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