

FIJI: Civil Coup Attempt

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The Situation

President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the current Fiji head of state, has declared a state of emergency and has asked for the immediate release of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his Parliamentarians who have been held hostage by armed gunman since Friday morning. Mr. Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, as well as many members of the international community, has condemned the recent actions. One of the hostage takers is Fiji businessman George Speight, who has declared himself Head of State.

The Fiji armed forces and police remain at the Parliament Building and on the streets. A curfew has been put in place from 6 pm to 6 am and remains in effect for two weeks. On Saturday morning, the military and the police commissioner announced their support for the President and the 1997 Constitution.

Extensive rioting and looting occurred in Suva City with an estimated 176 shops looted, a number of business destroyed by fire, and 269 people arrested. By Saturday the situation appeared to be under control. Air traffic from both Suva and Nadi airports remains unaffected, though security has been increased. International telephone service is sporadic.

The assault on Parliament came as more than 2,000 people demonstrated against Prime Minister Chaudhry on the anniversary of his election. The opposition marched through Suva starting at the Fiji flea market, damaging shops, while proceeding to the front gate of the Parliament complex calling out anti government slogans.

On 20 May 1999, the Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, was sworn in as Fiji's first Indian Prime Minister. The electoral victory of an Indian and the defeat of the former Prime Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, surprised many Fijian. Rabuka had led the 1987 coup by the mainly Fijian manned army against what was the country's first Indian dominated government.

The 1999 elections were the first which did not guarantee Fijians political power. The ensuing Labour victory was emphatic with 37 of 71 parliamentary seats, with thirty of those seats held by Indians. With this majority, there was concern of a nationalist backlash. In response to this, the 17 members of cabinet chosen by Chaudhry consists of 11 Fijians including two deputy prime ministers — and six Indian members.

Red Cross Response

The Director General of the Fiji Red Cross Society, John Scott, visited the Prime Minister and both the Fijian and Indian members of Parliament who are being held hostage in separate rooms. Mr. Scott is the only person who was allowed access. Mr. Scott has visited the hostages four times in the last two days and continues to deliver medicines required by some of those being held and has also been in contact with family members.

It has been reassuring to the national and international community that the Fiji Red Cross Society has been allowed to carry out its role of ensuring the hostages are being treated humanely, additionally Mr. Scott's visits are vital as a source of reassurance to family members.

In preparation for possible injuries, two Fiji Red Cross First Aid posts were set up on Friday near the Parliament, but as the demonstrators have disbanded, first aid service are no longer required, though the Fiji Red Cross National Society stands ready to offer assistance if needed

The Regional Delegation has advised that all delegates and staff in Suva are safe and well. The Regional Delegation staff are in the office and are lending support as needed by the Fiji Red Cross.

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