

**EARLY WARNING SYSTEM**

***Implementation Phase***

**2<sup>nd</sup> Quarterly Report**

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***Development Services Exchange***

Solomon Islands

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## **A Introduction**

This report presents a brief overview of the operating environment for civil society in the Solomon Islands and neighbouring island states during the second quarter (Feb-April 2010) of the full implementation phase. While the Solomon Islands remains the sole Pacific Island country of focus for the EWS project, special attention is also focused on the operating environment for civil society in Fiji. The 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter witnessed relative calm in the Solomon Islands while political developments in PNG and Vanuatu threatened the political stability of both countries. But the main concern continuing since 2006 is the Republic of Fiji which remains under tight control of the military regime. This will be highlighted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter report.

In general, all of the activities reported for the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter occurred in the Solomon Islands, particularly within the urban centres which host mainstream activities identified with civil society *activism*. The rural areas, which are predominantly cultural, are for the most part inaccessible, especially given communication constraints and the geographical remoteness of the country.

## **B Reported Activities etc.**

While there have been some problems with timely and consistent reporting, the contents of submissions remain relevant long past the scheduled time of reporting. The impact of events monitored and reported is part of a broader chain of events with more widespread and longer-lasting impact than the individual incidents and reports.

The events reported in the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter fall within the moderate category of the monitoring scale and do not warranting any immediate, let alone drastic action. This moderate threat level is typical of countries or societies in which civil society, as an unseen but gradually dynamic movement, is still an evolving concept. The Solomon Islands is one such country in which the trend of civil society *activism* is inconsistent and at time indeterminable. The following minor events were thus monitored during this period:

- (i) A new political party was founded by a so-called civil society activist whose loosely-formed organisation or loosely-formed (*People Power*) was implicated in the April 2006 riots which resulted in the looting and burning Chinatown in Honiara. The group allegedly instigated the havoc, under the guise of civil rights, by amassing its followers to converge on the grounds of Parliament on the day of

election of the Prime Minister. Earlier, the group's followers were allegedly instructed to rise up in protest in the event that Parliament elected an unpopular candidate as Prime Minister. The controversy thus arose when the public became aware of the group reorganising itself into a political party to contest the 2010 elections.

- (ii) The European Union's funding of the National Union of Workers (NUW) under its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) drew criticism. According to critics, the workers' union does not deserve recognition by the EIDHR given its poor track record on the protection of workers' rights, particularly the union's failure to protect the interest of more than a thousand plantation workers employed by 100-year old Levers Plantations Ltd. A year-long strike action instigated by the workers under the auspices of the NUW led to a mass sacking of workers the plantation company.
- (iii) The Minister of Foreign Affairs ejected media personnel from a press conference hosted for the said Minister and the visiting NZ Foreign Affairs Minister.
- (iv) Public outcry over the awarding of a telecommunications license to little-known mobile operator, *BeMobile*, has led to a protest march planned by concerned citizens. The peaceful march was intended to express to the Government the mass discontent of a majority of citizens with the decision to award the license to *BeMobile*. Application attempts made to the Police Commissioner for a permit to stage the planned march have repeatedly been rejected on trivial grounds.

With very few events reported within this quarter, there was little need for the prescription or implementation of urgent target actions. However, the trend is not that static as the situation has always been unpredictable and is often dictated by events that arise intermittently. Furthermore, the absence of an established network of civil society monitors, both nationally and regionally, renders implementation of EWS a solo effort by DSE. This limits objective reporting of events as perceived from different angles by different civil society actors.

## **CONCLUSION**

The low to moderate level of events reported attests to the rather calm environment in the Solomon Islands during the first quarter of 2010. While civil society enjoys a relatively

conducive environment compared to most other countries in the world, there is no guarantee that the country will not experience major upheavals in the not too distant future. The country has a recent history of sporadic upheavals triggered by events that otherwise appear minute or negligible in the beginning but later developed into major issues of national crisis. Unfortunately, some of these issues are still unresolved and thus will continue to haunt the country for many more years to come. Civil society will undoubtedly get embroiled in some of the unresolved issues which pose a *time-bomb* or *threat* to the country's *perceived* stability.