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Solomon Islands fighting intensifies



Rival ethnic militias fought fierce battles near the Solomon Islands capital Honiara on Wednesday, with one group using a captured police patrol boat to bombard a coastal village.

A school was reported hit in the bombardment by the Malaita Eagles militia, but no children were hurt as they had already been evacuated.

Andrew Nori, the leader of the group, which is holding the prime minister hostage, said his forces had targeted the rival militia in the bombardment and the casualties "could be between 50 and 100". There was no independent confirmation of any casualties.

Fighting near the airport has left foreign nationals in the country stranded, including a European Union fact-finding mission.

New Zealand has a frigate on standby in case evacuation is thought necessary.

A diplomat in Honiara told Reuters news agency that fighting also flared again near the airport, where the Malaita Eagles and their rivals - the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) - clashed on Tuesday.

But in a sign that a deal may be on the horizon, Mr Nori said his earlier demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu was now "obsolete".



The Malaita rebels seized key buildings in Honiara

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Mr Ulufa'alu's political fate will be determined in a parliamentary session on 15 June, where he will face a vote of no confidence, according to a joint statement from the government and Mr Nori.

Militia takeover

The Malaita Eagles took over Honiara on Monday and arrested Mr Ulufa'alu, saying he must resign. They raided police armouries and seized patrol boats.

The two groups have been battling for 18 months as the IFM tries to force migrants from the nearby island of Malaita off the main island of Guadalcanal.

The IFM accuses the Malaitans of taking over their land and homes on Guadalcanal.

Mr Ulufa'alu is himself from Malaita but is regarded as a turncoat by some.

Commonwealth foreign ministers have threatened to suspend the Solomon Islands from the body unless constitutional rule is restored soon.

Commonwealth's 'deep concern'

The eight-member Commonwealth Ministers Action Group, which met in London on Tuesday, expressed "deep concern" over the situation in the country.

The ministers demanded that the armed rebels withdraw their forces from Honiara and remove all constraints on the prime minister.

Prime Minister Ulufa'alu has made clear since his illegal arrest that he is prepared to resign at gunpoint if that is what it takes to achieve peace on the islands.

New Zealand's Foreign Minister Phil Goff said on Wednesday he had spoken with Mr Ulufa'alu and believed "an agreement of sorts" had been reached to resolve the crisis constitutionally.

A European Union representative



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Solomon Islands: key facts

in the Solomon Islands told the BBC that the capital was surrounded by ethnic Guadalcanalans, with more than 3,000 blockading the airport.

Mr Ulufa'alu is himself from Malaita but is regarded as a turncoat by some.

Fiji influence

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Population: 450,000

Spread over six large islands and many small ones

One of region's poorest countries and getting poorer

Exports: Cocoa, copra, fish and timber

Main partners: Australia and Japan

History: former British protectorate

The Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, said there was no doubt they had been influenced by events in Fiji, where the prime minister has been held hostage since last month.

Australia, one of the country's most important trading partners, and the United States have both condemned the takeover.

At least 60 people have been killed and about 20,000 people forced to flee their homes in clashes between the Eagles and the IFM.



The rebel groups have been fighting for 18 months

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