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## FIJI: Update: It is now the army versus Speight

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**Note No. 107**

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**by S.Chandrasekharan**

*"You cannot walk straight along a crooked path"*

This is how a frustrated Army Spokesman Lt. Col. Filipo Tarakinikini described his negotiation with Speight. He is dealing with a crook.

The hostage drama continued for the forty third day with no end in sight. On 23<sup>rd</sup> June, the hostage crisis was seemingly coming to an end. There were only a few points to be tied up before the hostages were to be released and these included the nomination of an interim President by the Great Council of Chiefs, limited amnesty for Speight's men, interim civilian administration with a few Indian Fijians included.

As a follow up, Speight's men released four of the hostages, all women on 26<sup>th</sup>, leaving 27 still in custody.

But Speight as before, shifted the goal posts and made a set of new demands. These related to the appointment of a new President to be chosen by Speight and the Western Chiefs, compensation to Speight's men and no non indigenous people to be included in the cabinet of interim government.

Frustrated over frequent change of demands, the Army issued a twenty four-hour ultimatum to Speight to accept the conditions already agreed to and release the hostages. Speight promptly rejected the ultimatum and it is now a "war of attrition" between Speight and the Army.

The Army Spokesman repeated his earlier statement that the "use of force to free the hostages was still an option but extremely unlikely one."

Meantime, the Army is making preparations to declare an area of 2 Km radius as military zone around the Parliament house. This would involve the eviction of all civilians who have invaded the parliament house in support of Speight as also some civilians outside. Current Vice President Joseph Iloilo is also being tipped to be appointed as the acting President.

With incessant rains the sanitary conditions in and around the place where the hostages are kept have deteriorated and the place stinks. People are cooking and washing in the lawns.

The hostages are racially segregated and are barred from reading newspapers, listening to radio news and watching television.

Mrs. Virmati Chaudhry has been unable to meet her husband, the prime minister ever since he was taken into custody.

The hostages are being psychologically abused. Each day one or other is being taken out as if he/she is going to be executed only to be returned after some time. This has placed tremendous tension on the hostages.

There are allegations that the Christian churches are tacitly supporting the coup of Speight.

One of the strongest opponents of the racially based coup, the Rev Josateki Koroi compared the attitude of Fiji's churches to that attributed to Pope Pius XII during World War II when he failed to directly address the issue of Jewish persecution.

Christian ministers continue to visit the hostages, but there has been no sign of Hindu or Muslim clerics being allowed in. Speight's security adviser, Ilios Ligairi, reportedly said that to allow this would be "against the objectives of the coup"

Whether the country is to be run by the army or Speight's men, for the Fijians of Indian origin, the present constitution which gave them equal rights is as good as dead. Any new constitution to be imposed after a lapse of two years will be weighted in favour of the indigenous Fijians. Another exodus of Indians is inevitable.

The first priority for the Indian government is to get the hostages released. Australia and New Zealand are seen to be active but there is a view that these countries are not putting sufficient pressure. Severe sanctions at this juncture may not help and on the contrary make Speight who is losing sympathy, a hero in the eyes of the Fijians. Once the hostages are released Indian efforts should be to collect enough evidence to bring Speight to justice as an international criminal.

The developments in Fiji have exposed the limitations of Indian power. China faced a similar dilemma in Indonesia when the Indonesians of Chinese origin were systematically attacked and their shops looted. People of Indian origin in Trinidad- Tobago and Guyana are vulnerable and may face similar problems. While conditions in each country vary, it is time that government of India reviews its options in these countries before any serious situation develops.

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