

Fiji government expands crackdown on Methodists

News

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New York, August 30 (ENInews)--Fiji's military government has expanded a crackdown on the Methodist Church, banning all church meetings except for Sunday worship and forbidding clergy from leaving the country.

Military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Neumi Leweni was quoted in an article on the Fiji Times website on 30 August as saying that Methodist leaders will need to "seek clarification" from the government for meetings (except worship) or foreign travel.

The restrictions came in a letter from the Fiji Military Council, according to a 30 August news release from the Methodist Church in Britain, which has been following closely events in the former British colony.

The order prevented Methodist members from traveling to Samoa for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Pacific Council of Churches. Last week, the government canceled for the third time the church's annual meeting after church President Ame Tugauwe and General Secretary Tuikilakila Waqairatu, who have been vocal in their criticisms of the military regime, refused to step down. Since taking power in a 2006 coup, the government has suspended the constitution, detained opponents and suppressed freedom of speech.

"We are gravely concerned about how this situation is developing," said Michael King, World Church Relationships Team Leader for the Methodist Church in Britain, in a statement on 30 August. "Our brothers and sisters in Fiji are asking us to keep them in our prayers and to tell the world their story. We are worried for Fiji. We are not only worried about religious freedom, but also about what the loss of other freedoms might mean for all Fijians in this traditionally democratic island nation."

The Methodist church is the largest Christian denomination in the Pacific island nation, representing about one-third of the population of about 850,000. It is also the largest denomination for indigenous Fijians.

Fiji is the subject of sanctions by Australia, New Zealand, the U.S. and the European Union and is also suspended from the Commonwealth and the Pacific Islands Forum because of the government's failure to meet a deadline for democratic elections.