

# Coup fears rise as Fiji strongman flies home

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 Australian warships on standby as Suva  
 police chief says matters set to worsen

## MILITARY CHIEF MEETS PETERS

Delicate negotiations to try to avert a coup in Fiji continued in Wellington yesterday, with Foreign Minister Winston Peters meeting the head of the Pacific nation's military, Commodore Frank Bainimarama.

Commodore Bainimarama was in Wellington over the weekend on family business. Last week Mr Peters was non-committal when asked if he would meet him during the visit, but the two men met on Saturday.

With the crisis in Fiji escalating sharply yesterday the two met again, but a spokesman for Mr Peters would not comment on what they discussed. Commodore Bainimarama is scheduled to return to Fiji today, and it is

understood no further meetings between himself and Mr Peters were planned.

Prime Minister Helen Clark said the situation in Fiji was "very, very concerning" and that officials had taken prudent steps to ensure the safety of New Zealanders.

Contingency plans for an evacuation of New Zealanders from Fiji had been laid out weeks ago, and remained in place, she said.

Air Force transport planes were available, but she noted that in previous upheavals in Fiji New Zealanders had been able to get out of the country on commercial flights. She hoped it would not come to that. — Mike Houlahan

by Angela Gregory

Fiji will be on tenterhooks today with the expected return of its outspoken military chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama, whose brinkmanship with the Government has raised fresh fears of an imminent coup.

Commodore Bainimarama is due to return to Fiji after visiting New Zealand for the christening of his granddaughter.

Fiji Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes told the Herald yesterday that the situation in Fiji was grave and he expected it to deteriorate rapidly when the military commander returned.

Mr Hughes, who has previously played down concerns of a fourth coup, said the commodore had made clear his intention to remove the Fijian Government.

"There is nothing I, or anyone else in Fiji, can do to control the commander when he returns."

Commodore Bainimarama has said on the fijilive.com website that Mr Hughes, an Australian, should leave Fiji as things are going to "blow up".

At the weekend Commodore Bainimarama called about 1000 reservists back to their barracks, saying he intended to "clean up" the Government. He warned foreign powers against interfering.

The military chief has been demanding the Government back down on proposed law changes surrounding the ownership of coastal resources and land rights in the Qoliqoli Bill and Land Tribunal Bill, which he claims puts the country's stability at risk. He also wants the police to back off investigating him for alleged sedition.

Commodore Bainimarama has already succeeded in getting the Government to drop a clause in its Racial Tolerance and Unity Bill that would

have allowed amnesty for perpetrators of the 2000 coup, but also wants ministers implicated in that uprising removed from office. He was also enraged by a police search of the office of President Ratu Josefa Iloilo last week as part of sedition investigations.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer has said he believes a military coup is likely in the next week or two, and three warships are on standby, ready to evacuate Australians.

Mr Downer told the ABC yesterday that Australia, New Zealand and the United States had been doing their best to discourage the commodore "but he still seems to me to be pretty set on his plans". He also claimed New Zealand had moved some of its high commission staff out of Suva because of a "specific threat" against Kiwis.

A New Zealand Foreign Affairs spokesman would neither confirm nor deny that yesterday, saying only that some staff and their dependants had been temporarily shifted out of Suva "in response to security".

Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase yesterday told the Fijian Parliament he was still willing to enter into dialogue with Commodore Bainimarama and called on the military not to consider him and the Government as adversaries. However, the military is now calling on the police to investigate Mr Qarase and others who tried to remove the commodore this month.

A Fijian governance expert, Dr Steven Ratuva, said the positions appeared entrenched but he hoped the impasse could still be broken.

Dr Ratuva said Mr Downer's comments, including that a regional military response might be justified, did not help the situation. That had given impetus for the commander to mobilise reservists, even though no one seriously thought Australia would invade.

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STANDOVER TACTICS: Commodore Frank Bainimarama (centre, wearing headphones) has repeatedly threatened to force the Qarase Government in Fiji to resign.

PICTURE / FIJI TIMES

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# Fiji military calls up reservists ahead of 'clean-up' operation

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## Threat grows stronger as commander talks of need to clear 'national insecurity'

SUVA — The Fijian military yesterday ratcheted up talk of overthrowing the Government, saying reservists had been recalled for a "clean-up" campaign.

Military commander Frank Bainimarama told [fijilive.com](http://fijilive.com) that if Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase did not bow to the military's demands to drop all investigations into its officers then the Army would act.

"My intention of removing this Government is clear," Commodore Bainimarama said

from NZ, where he is on a private visit. "If they are going to prosecute me if my clean-up campaign fails then it is their concern."

More than 1000 Territorials were recalled at the weekend for what Commodore Bainimarama described

as preparation for the "clean-up" of Mr Qarase's Government.

He told the reservists two weeks ago that the Fijian military "is encountering a difficult period and we need to clear the insecurity in the nation".

Australian

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said last Thursday "there is clear evidence he is planning a coup in the next couple of weeks".

The hardening of the military's attitude came as the Director of Public Prosecutions, Josaia Naigulevu, confirmed he had

passed to police a legal opinion on one of the military files forwarded to his office.

"I will not confirm if [we recommended] a charge. It may not help in national security," he told [fijilive.com](http://fijilive.com).

The files on the military forwarded

**"There is clear evidence he is planning a coup in the next couple of weeks."**

Alexander Downer

## TROOP RECALL

- More than 1000 Fijian Territorial Force personnel have been recalled.
- They have been told it is in preparation for a clean-up campaign.
- The clean-up involves removing the Fiji Government.

to Mr Naigulevu included one on whether sedition charges could be laid against Commodore Bainimarama.

The military commander has also warned Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes, an Australian, that he should leave the country now before things "blow up".

The military last week issued the Government with a list of nine "non-negotiable" demands to meet in two weeks.

They include dropping police investigations into the sedition charges against Commodore Bainimarama and sacking Mr Hughes.

The commander has accused the Government of corruption and lying and has repeatedly threatened to force it to resign.

— AFP

## New trial ordered for ex-Fijian prime minister

11-26-06 HSB AS

**6** SUVA, Fiji >> A judge hearing charges that Fiji's former prime minister incited an army mutiny in the South Pacific nation declared a mistrial Tuesday and ordered a retrial to begin this week.

High Court Justice Gerard Winter discharged the five jurors after an application by defense lawyers on Monday. Winter gave no reason for his decision, but local media said prosecutors failed to fully disclose evidence.

Former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka faces charges of inciting an army mutiny that targeted the armed forces commander. The clash in the South Pacific nation on Nov. 2, 2000, left five rebel soldiers and three loyalist troops dead.