Situation Overview

The situation in Honiara remains tense after three days of civil unrest that left dozens of private properties and public facilities looted and burnt. The violence started on 24 November when demonstrators identified as a group from the province of Malaita marched towards the Parliament to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. The group was then joined by others, mostly young men, that went on to loot and burn, targeting mostly “Asian-owned” businesses; but who also destroyed a high school, a police station, a bank, and the largest hardware store in the city. The city’s Chinatown was left in almost total ruin. The group was met by the police who tried to disperse protestors with tear gas.

The government imposed a 36-hour lockdown which lapsed at 7am on Friday, 26 November. The mob, however, continued its defiance. As the sporadic burning and looting continued on its second day, Australia, upon the request of the Solomon Islands Government, deployed 23 Australian Federal Police (AFP) on 25 November to help quell the violence. Another 50 AFP personnel and 43 Australian Defence Force (ADF) troops arrive on 26 November as reinforcements. The deployment is expected to last a few weeks and is covered by a security treaty signed by Solomon Islands and Australia in 2017. Following the arrival of the ADF contingent, the Government has announced a daily curfew from 7pm to 6am until further notice to help curb the unbridled looting and burning in the city. A further 120 police are being sent by the Government of Papua New Guinea.

UNICEF Response

UNICEF operates a sizeable multisectoral field office in the Solomon Islands which maintains a stock of emergency supplies that can immediately be mobilized. Though staff are confined to their homes because of the lockdown, they continue to coordinate with government and humanitarian partners and are ready for deployment. Negotiations are ongoing to conduct damage and needs assessment as soon as it is safe. The office is mobilizing its emergency stocks to respond to the request of the Ministry of Women, Youth & Family Affairs for non-food items (NFIs) to address the needs of families affected by the burning and looting. All Honiara city clinics except for the National Referral Hospital (NRH) are closed, thereby diverting a high number of emergency and non-emergency cases including injuries caused as a result of the rioting, to the NRH. There, UNICEF tents had already been set-up for COVID-19 response, which can now be used for triage if necessary. Moreover, ventilators provided to the NRH can be used for patients suffering from smoke inhalation. UNICEF also recently helped install a power generator which has so far ensured the continued operations of the National Medical Store in Honiara, including COVID-19 vaccines. Currently, doctors’ and nurses have difficulties reaching the hospital as well as reaching those that require urgent medical attention.

Who to contact for further information:

Jonathan Veitch
Representative
UNICEF Pacific Multi-Country Office
Tel: +679 9925427
Email: jveitch@unicef.org

Vathinee Jitjaturunt
Deputy Representative
UNICEF Pacific Multi-Country Office
Tel: +679 9925613
Email: vjitjaturunt@unicef.org

Zelalem Taffesse
Chief, Solomon Islands Field Office
UNICEF Pacific Multi-Country Office
Tel: +677 7496172
Email: ztaffesse@unicef.org