

FIJI VILLAGERS' BUS TRIP TO FREEDOM

Phil Thornton

The Indo-Fijian villagers of Muaniweni have been terrorised and beaten by masked men from the village of Muamua in the Fiji Islands. Local police, media and army have failed to protect them. Helped by donations from a Suva-based group of humanitarians, they have decided to flee their homes. The villagers asked journalist Phil Thornton to join them on their flight to safety.

The villagers of Muaniweni have had enough. Since Fiji rebel leader George Speight's armed coup, masked men have terrorised them, battered them, stolen their possessions, killed their farm animals and trashed their homes.

Now the villagers say they can't take any more of the violence so they're leaving. They have taken advantage of the long weekend to break out.

They've been briefed to tell military roadblocks that they are on their way to a religious ceremony in Nadi.

'We lost our security ... we can't live here,' says villager Rudra Deo, whose wife had a razor-sharp axe held to her throat by a masked man demanding money from her, or they'd rape her.

'If we hear a dog bark we're frightened. We can't sleep. We can't eat. So much damage has been done to our village and we've had no protection from the police or the army,' he says sadly.

Many of the villagers are crying as they file slowly onto the large, single-decker bus, hired by concerned people in Suva, to take 72 villagers to a safe sanctuary in Lautoka on the western side of Viti Levu.

This will be Fiji's first refugee camp and is set up in the grounds of the Lautoka Sanatan Primary School.

The men, women and children are dressed in donated clothing and look as if they're going on a Sunday outing.

But the packed bus is silent. Deadly quiet.

Children aren't laughing. Women quietly weep and men stare blankly. Bulging suitcases and string-tied cardboard boxes jam the aisle.

'We've left everything behind, we just turned our animals loose, I've got three young children to think of,' says Deo.

The villagers explain that armed masked men still wander around the village at night making noises.

The bus kicks up clouds of dust as it bounces down the hills and slowly edges its way up them as it makes its way over 20 kilometres of unsealed road to the main road. The bus has to cover a slow 260 kilometres before it reaches Lautoka.

Every military roadblock the bus passes increases the tension for the villagers. And they almost lose it completely at Pacific Harbour, on the outskirts of Suva, when a policeman runs from the station and waves the bus to stop.

Panic sweeps through the villagers as the policeman and driver talk. To the relief of the passengers the bus is waved on.

The driver explains that a family who was meant to join the bus at Suva had phoned the police station to leave a message to say they would make their own way to Lautoka.

Many of the villagers have never been away from Muaniweni before, explains James Chandra. 'We only ever leave the village for weddings or ceremonies, then it's all noise, music and laughter. Look at us — we're so sad.'

Village shopkeeper Subhash Chand, 23, was in his house with his grandmother, mother and father when the masked men started smashing their front door with cane knives.

‘I had an iron bar and a knife, but when I saw how many there were, I dropped my knife and my knees wouldn’t stop shaking.’

The masked men told Subhash that if he stayed in his house they would burn it with him in it.

‘I was angry but what could I do. They hit me with the cane knife, but I fell and it broke the impact. They kicked and punched me. Most of the attackers were my customers,’ he says shaking his head.

The people don’t expect any help from the authorities. According to trainee teacher Amitesh Chandra, 19, the villagers feel the local media has let them down.

‘When we needed them to come and photograph our houses they never came, now we have to leave our homes and seek sanctuary from people in the west,’ says an angry Amitesh.

The bus winds around the edges of the Coral Coast passing holiday resorts popular with Australian holiday-makers: Naviti, Warwick and the Hideaway.

As they get further from Suva, the villagers relax and start to talk. Finally, the bus pulls up in front of the gates of the Lautoka Sanatan Primary School, but because of its size is unable to enter. The villagers spill from the bus carrying their boxes and suitcases.

Young boys are struggling with bags and old women carrying religious artifacts.

Within minutes of the classrooms being opened the women have found straw brushes and are cleaning the floors. The men move the benches and desks from the rooms. Children have found the swings and slides in the playground and are laughing.

‘Our women and children are really happy to be safe,’ says a pleased Amitesh.

As word gets out on the ‘coconut telegraph’ of the refugees’ arrival, curious locals start to stream into the school grounds.

When the locals hear the villagers’ stories there’s much shaking of heads, tears and anger.

‘We have to protect these people. We’ll give them food, shelter anything they need we’ll find it for them,’ says local chef, Edward John.

Another local says Indo-Fijians and Fijians in the west get on and there’s no problem here.

While groups of enthusiastic locals go off to organise mattresses, blankets and food, the villagers call a meeting. Dr Roy Krishna, head of School of Health Sciences at the Fiji School of Medicine, talks to the older villagers about the importance of taking their prescribed medications. He says it’s crucial their health is monitored and local doctors have offered to come by in the morning to do so.

‘Many of these people will suffer mental trauma. It’s not only from the physical attacks, but also the lack of security, and emotional shock of leaving their homes and a lifetime of memories behind. All this will erode their mental well-being,’ says Dr Krishna.

Rajmaz Avisher carries his young son, Rahil, 8, to Dr Krishna. He explains the frail-looking boy has a congenital heart problem and has to take regular medication and see a specialist.

‘It’s a big problem for us. I’ve got three other children and we’re really frightened,’ says Avisher.

Dr Krishna reassures the father and boy that he will have a doctor look at his son in the morning.

A spokeswoman for the organisers of the freedom bus trip says her group will be looking at bringing in counsellors, family support workers, doctors and legal opinion to help the villagers get back to normal.

A week ago Amitesh Chandra, 19, was a polite young villager, but you get the feeling he’s had enough of being kicked around. He’s busy organising security for the school grounds and has met with the local police and army.

‘The [local] community support is wonderful. The people are very kind. Even the police and the army have promised to protect us. At home in our village we were easy to pick on, here we’ll be safe. We’re all together,’ says a determined Amitesh.