

The day Siti was battered

By REGGIE DUTT

SITIVENI MOCE, a 37-year-old *Sun* photojournalist, was beaten by rebels in the Fiji Parliament during the Speight coup crisis in full view of other media. Siti says he is glad that none of his media colleagues tried to take pictures of him being assaulted, or come to his rescue.

If they had, he believes, things would have turned out bloody and people could have lost their lives. It was 4 July 2000 and Siti left his Walu Bay office at 1.40pm to cover a press conference called by George Speight at the parliamentary complex at Nasese.

Earlier that day, a truck used to cart food crops and people was stopped at the Maunikoso police post, not far from Parliament, and rebels made their way down to the post to escort it. That led to a brief stand-off between the rebels and police.

When Siti made his way to Parliament he was accused by the rebels of taking pictures during the stand-off.

"One of the gunmen pointed a gun at my head and told me that, since there was no law, he could just blow my head off," Siti says.

It was a case of mistaken identity and Siti says he made it clear to the rebels that he was not the person that they thought he was.

He says the rebels called *The Sun* office to cross-check his whereabouts at the time of the stand-off and then allowed him to go to the conference room for the press conference.

"When I reached the bure (conference room), it had finished and as I made my way up the steps, a group of about 40 men confronted me and ...," Siti doesn't complete the sentence, but his silence is enough.

He says he was scared and felt threatened at times when he went out to take pictures in Parliament, especially with the gunmen around.

He had the gun pointed to his head one too many times during the crisis. If another crisis like events following May 19 were to unfold again, in a thoughtful moment he would rather take leave from work and stay away from it all. But Siti has a love for photography and sees taking pictures as his duty to inform the wider public about what goes on in society.

□ *Pacific Journalism Online (USP), 22 May 2001*

SAMISONI PARETI

In contrast to the 1987 coups, no media organisation was forced to close nor underwent military censorship during the May 19 crisis. But this is not to say that covering the coup was without its dangers. The trashing of Fiji Television on the night of May 28 is well documented and Speight supporters assaulted a number of journalists, including *The Sun's* Sitiveni Moce (*see breakout*) and Leone Cabenatabua.

Lives of many reporters were threatened, and a good number lived outside of their homes in the first few weeks of the crisis. Reporters at Radio Fiji had to refrain from mentioning their names when answering telephones at one time after being repeatedly abused by anonymous callers. Armed soldiers had to be posted as guards at national radio and television stations.

Threats came in other ways. Some lost their jobs as newsrooms underwent cost-cutting measures like every other organisation and business in the country. Staff at the *Daily Post* suffered a 50 percent pay cut while it was 16.5 percent for those in *The Sun*. Casual employees were laid off at Communications Fiji Ltd and permanent staff had their pay reduced as well. Better off were journalists at *The Fiji Times*, Radio Fiji and Fiji Television since cost-cutting measures for them were in other forms like a freeze in recruitment and travel.

□ *Samisoni Pareti is editor of The Sun. At the time of the May 19 coup, he reported a scoop on the gunmen sealing off Parliament for Radio Fiji. He later reported the crisis for the Pacific region through Pacnews. This article was part of a special retrospective supplement published in The Sun on 19 May 2001.*