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WESTERN SAMOA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL TO OBSERVE SEDITION TRIAL

Amnesty International has sent an observer to the trial of two community leaders facing sedition charges at the Apia Magistrate's Court tomorrow.

The charges against the two men appear to be linked to peaceful demonstrations criticizing the introduction of consumer taxes by the Human Rights Protection Party government in March 1994.

Amnesty International believes that the two community leaders have been denied the fundamental right to freedom of expression and association, and if convicted and sentenced to a prison term, they would become prisoners of conscience.

The human rights organization is calling on the Government of Western Samoa to immediately and unconditionally drop the charges against the two community leaders.

Faamatuainu Tala Mailei, 69, a former parliamentarian, and Toalepaialii Toesulusulu Siueva, 52, a former cabinet minister, were accused on 4 February this year of "speaking seditious words with intention to excite disaffection against the government" and "publishing a press statement containing seditious libel". Both men are senior members of Tumua and Pule, the body of high-ranking chiefs from traditional districts. The two face sentences of up to two years.

Tumua and Pule organized demonstrations in March 1994, and continued its protest following moves by the Prime Minister to undermine the constitutional role of the Audit Office which in June 1994 released a report into government spending implicating seven cabinet ministers with corruption. In early February 1995, only days before a demonstration organised by the group, the police laid the sedition charges against the two men who are Tumua and Pule's chairman and an executive member.

On 7 February 1995 Amnesty International wrote to the Government of Western Samoa expressing its concern that the men are accused of what appears to be the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression which is guaranteed by the Western Samoan Constitution and international human rights standards. The government replied that they were charged "because the Police believe they have sufficient evidence to prove that these two gentlemen have broken the law".

Since then, the Western Samoan government has reportedly stepped up its attempts to prevent public debate on the issue. A petition to the Head of State, signed by at least 90,000 Samoans and asking for the abolition of the controversial taxes, was initially declared invalid by the Prime Minister who then moved to launch an inquiry into the authenticity of the signatures. At the same time, Western Samoan police requested journalists to appear at tomorrow's sedition trial as witnesses for the prosecution.

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