

TAPOL calls on Timorese Justice Minister to drop charges against Timorese journalist

The decision by Lucia Lobato, the Justice Minister of Timor Leste, to sue an investigative journalist for publishing a story about alleged corruption over a contract to refurbish a prison and purchase prison uniforms from her husband's company is a serious violation of the basic right of journalists to report on a case of alleged corruption and a threat to freedom of the press in the country.

Jose Antonio Belo, the journalist who now faces these defamation charges, is the editor in-chief of *Tempo Semanal*, one of the country's small number of newspapers. He was part of the resistance movement against the Indonesian occupation of his country. He spent three years in jail and endured horrific acts of torture from the Indonesian occupiers, along with many other courageous Timorese fighters against the occupation.

TAPOL is deeply distressed by this attack on the freedom of the press in Timor Leste and calls upon the Justice Minister to drop the charges and acknowledge the right of a journalist to publish reports without the fear of facing the charge of defamation.

Ironically, the law now being used against Jose Belo is a legacy from the Indonesian occupation and could result in Belo being sentenced to up to six years in prison.

Carmel Budiardjo of TAPOL said: 'We are well acquainted with the courage of Jose Belo during the more than two decades of the Indonesian occupation and are aghast that a law introduced by the Indonesians is now being used to stifle the legitimate activities of the press in a country that claims to be a democracy. Minister of Justice Lucia Lobato should withdraw the charges in recognition of the principle of the freedom of the press. Timorese journalists should not live in fear of charges that could land them in prison simply because they have done what any journalist would be expected to do when they find evidence of alleged corruption by a member of the government.'

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