

## **International Federation of Journalists Media Release**

### **Newspaper Editor Faces Criminal Defamation Charges in Timor Leste**

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The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is concerned at the status of the free media in Timor Leste as a local newspaper editor faces a possible prison sentence on charges of criminal defamation.

According to local reports, the editor of *Tempo Semanal*, Jose Belo, was issued with a notification of defamation charges on December 12, 2008, in relation to a series of news reports published on October 12, 2008. The reports investigated alleged corruption by Justice Minister Lucia Lobato.

Belo appeared at the Prosecutor's Office on January 19 and was reportedly questioned for three hours before being released.

The IFJ is also concerned about the application of fair judicial process, in view of reports that Belo and *Tempo Semanal* have been denied access to documentation pertaining to the charges by the Office of the Prosecutor-General, Longunos Monteiro.

"The charges of criminal defamation against Jose Belo and *Tempo Semanal* highlight the two-fold problem for independent media in Timor Leste – the targeting of journalists who report in the public interest and the need for a constitutionally recognised media law which does not criminalise defamation," IFJ Asia-Pacific Director Jacqueline Park said.

In October 2008, Timor Leste's Government released the draft of a new penal code which decriminalises defamation. However, the code is awaiting Parliamentary approval.

All legal actions related to the media in Timor Leste, which was previously occupied by Indonesia, continue to refer to Indonesian law in which defamation may be dealt with as a criminal offence.

"Wherever journalists face the risk of imprisonment for conducting their professional work, the media cannot confidently fulfill its responsibility to act as guardians of the public interest," Park said.

The IFJ calls on the Government of Timor Leste to honour its commitment to enact a media law in which defamation is dealt with under a civil code rather than a criminal code, in the interests of the principles of plurality and freedom of expression.

For further information contact IFJ Asia-Pacific on +612 9333 0919.

The IFJ represents over 600,000 journalists in 120 countries worldwide.