

62/96

AI INDEX: AFR 63/03/96

**EMBARGO FOR RELEASE UNTIL MONDAY 25 MARCH - 1800 HRS GMT**

ZAMBIA: UN TO SCRUTINIZE IMPRISONMENT OF ZAMBIAN JOURNALISTS

The case of two newspaper journalists who were imprisoned for writing articles critical of the Zambian Government could be raised tomorrow, when the Zambian Government will defend its human rights record before a meeting of the Human Rights Committee at the UN in New York.

“Under both Zambian law and international law, the government has not provided these journalists with a fair trial and therefore has no right to deprive them of their liberty,” Amnesty International said in a 13-page report released today.

Fred M'membe and Bright Mwape, editor-in-chief and managing editor of *The Post* newspaper in Zambia, had written articles critical of Vice President Godfrey Miyanda, who made a speech in parliament attacking a January decision by Zambia's Supreme Court that ruled unconstitutional regulations that infringed on the right to assembly. The two men are being held in indefinite detention until they formally apologize to the Zambian National Assembly and plead for forgiveness.

Amnesty International considers Fred M'membe and Bright Mwape to be prisoners of conscience and calls on the Zambian Government to set them free at once unconditionally.

There appears to be a long-standing policy by the Zambian Government to misuse criminal charges against journalists with the aim of harassing and intimidating the independent press into docility. During the past few years, the government has been angered in particular by criticism and negative articles published in *The Post* newspaper.

Government attacks against the media have intensified. The government's threats of criminal charges, detentions for questioning and arrests in 1994 and 1995 against Fred M'membe and other staff members of *The Post* have escalated in 1996, culminating in the banning of the 5 February edition of the newspaper and hunts conducted by Zambian police for Fred M'membe and Bright Mwape.

The membership of the Standing Orders Committee of the National Assembly of Zambia -- which sentenced the journalists to indefinite detention on 22 February -- is dominated by the ruling party, the Movement for Multiparty Democracy, which holds all but one of the seats on the Committee.

The charges of “contempt of parliament” were reportedly raised in the Committee by the aggrieved party in the case, Vice President Godfrey Miyanda, who is also the Committee's deputy chair. All these factors raise concerns about whether such a body could render an independent, objective and fair ruling in the matter.

ENDS\