

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AFR 55/002/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 147
22 August 2002

Swaziland: Acquittal of Mario Masuku is an opportunity to end persecution of the opposition

Amnesty International welcomes the acquittal today in the High Court of Swaziland of opposition leader Mario Masuku on a charge of sedition.

The charge against Mr. Masuku, president of the opposition organization, the People's United Democratic Movement (PUDEMO), arose from his involvement in a peaceful protest march in November 2000.

"This acquittal, following a lengthy trial, is a vindication of the accused and his right to participate in non-violent political activities. It is also confirmation of the integrity of the judicial process," Amnesty International said.

Mario Masuku as well as his family suffered considerable psychological, physical and economic hardships. He was arrested in November 2000, and released under oppressive bail conditions which he endured until October 2001. He was imprisoned later that month for breaching his bail conditions and remained in custody until his acquittal on 22 August 2002. He has on previous occasions, in the early 1990s, been detained, prosecuted and acquitted of treason and sedition.

Following Mario Masuku's arrest in November 2000, Amnesty International campaigned to ensure that he received a fair and speedy trial, and sent an observer to attend the final stages of the trial in August 2002.

"The government of King Mswati III and Prime Minister Sibusiso Dlamini should respect the verdict of the court today and stop the persecution of opposition leaders such as Mario Masuku and others who are seeking non-violent solutions to the country's grave political, social and economic problems," Amnesty International said.

The government should also repeal the numerous laws and decrees which restrict the rights to non-violent assembly, association and freedom of expression. Their continued use violates international human rights standards and creates the context for human rights violations by the police.

The government should seize the opportunity provided by the appointment earlier this year of a constitutional drafting committee to create a climate in which genuine constitutional and political reform consistent with the promotion and protection of human rights can take place.

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