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## **Timor-Leste: Journalists at risk of imprisonment for exposing corruption**

All charges must be dropped against two Timorese journalists facing prison sentences for exposing alleged corruption in their country's judicial system, Amnesty International said.

A court in Timor-Leste's capital Dili is tomorrow set to deliver its verdict against Oscar Maria Salsinha of the Suara Timor Lorosa'e newspaper and Raimundo Oki of the Independente newspaper. The two reporters are accused of "slandorous denunciations", which carries a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment or a fine.

The charges stem from separate articles Salsinha and Oki wrote on 31 December 2011 and 2 January 2012, both on the suspected involvement of a District Prosecutor in receiving a bribe in a traffic accident case which occurred on 18 October 2011.

"These two journalists have done nothing but their job and exercised their right to freedom of expression by reporting on possible corruption in the judicial system," Isabelle Arradon, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia-Pacific Director said.

"If they are convicted, it could set a dangerous precedent for journalists and human rights defenders in Timor-Leste, where the legal system could be used to silence critical voices. It would also send a chilling signal on wider issues of freedom of expression and the media in the country.

"While everyone has the right to protection against unlawful attacks on their reputation, this should be a matter for civil litigation, not criminal law.

"If the two men are convicted and imprisoned tomorrow, Amnesty International will campaign for their immediate and unconditional release."

### **Background**

The two journalists have been charged with violating Article 285 of the Timor-Leste Penal Code criminalizing "slandorous denunciations".

Such legal provisions are incompatible with full respect for and proper protection of freedom of expression as provided for in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Timor-Leste ratified in 2003, as well as the Timor-Leste Constitution.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) has criticized the use of criminal defamation charges as a means of repressing freedom of expression and has explained that charges related to defamation, libel and slander should be dealt with by the authorities under civil, not criminal, law and that there should not be prison sentences for such charges.

The UN Human Rights Committee has also stressed that imprisonment is never an appropriate penalty in such cases.