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Press Release

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NZ BSA upholds government complaint over TVNZ ‘gangs, drugs and guns’ news item

...TVNZ ordered to make public statement, pay \$5000 to Samoa Govt and \$2000 to Crown

The New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority has found TVNZ in breach of standard broadcasting laws in relation to a news item claiming widespread gangs and drugs and gun smuggling in Samoa.

The Samoan government, through the Attorney General’s Office (and the assistance of the law firm Chapman and Tripp), laid a complaint with the Authority following the One News item - aired also by the network’s prime-time *Tagata Pasifika* programme - in April last year..

The Samoan government’s complaint alleged breach of law and order, balance, accuracy and fairness under the BSA laws of the news item in question.

Asked for comment this afternoon, Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi remained circumspective. “I see it not so much a victory for our (Samoan) government but a victory for responsible and substantive reporting,” said the Prime Minister.

“There have been far too many incidences of unbalanced reporting with reporters and editors alike bent on producing and publishing half-cooked, sensationalized stories with the sole aim of stirring up controversy.

“The ruling by the BSA is an onus for broadcasters and publishers to produce fair, balanced, in-depth and accurate news items.”

He added;

“There are also some very important lessons there for our local editors and budding journalists in how they do their jobs.”

FINDINGS

Regarding balance reporting, the BSA in its 30-page findings concluded that the news item “only presented one perspective...viewers needed information about the gravity of the problem in a wider context and from other perspectives”.

According to the Authority;

“Given that New Zealand is home to a significant Pacific Island community, and that New Zealand has strong historical ties with Samoa, the Authority disagrees with TVNZ that the issue was not of public importance to New Zealand.”

“In the Authority’s view, the cumulative effect of such a dramatic introduction coupled with the information presented in the item was to create an impression for viewers that not only was the situation in Samoa extremely serious, but Government officials were complicit in the guns and drugs trade.”

“While the reporter’s (TVNZ Pacific correspondent Barbara Dreaver) information does show that there have been isolated incidences involving drugs and guns in Samoa spread over a number of years, it does not support the impression given in the item that Samoa was ‘awash’ with guns and drugs.

“...the reporter’s evidence certainly does not support her unequivocal statements, the entire thrust of the item, or the suggestion that the situation was so clear-cut that no alternative perspective needed to be given in the item.”

On the question of accuracy, the BSA found that the reporter, “under the circumstances should have questioned their (Makoi Boys) reliability and made efforts to corroborate what they said.”

The Authority pointed out,

“The transcript of the interview, as well as the footage in the item, suggested that the ‘Makoi Boys’ were joking around and acted for the cameras. The boys were visibly amused by the interview and their own responses.

“The Makoi boys’ also laughed when the reporter commented “you guys look so tough’, and when one of them said ‘the matai hate us’.

‘The Makoi boys also laughed when asking each other how prison was, and the transcript recorded one of them saying, “see if you hadn’t been` so heavy-handed and chopped the hand off someone with an axe which caused you to be locked up [men all laughing]”. The complainant has provided evidence from the Ministry of Police and Prisons in Samoa which confirms that none of the ‘Makoi Boys’ had any criminal conviction’

The two other complaints on fairness and the impact on law and order were not upheld by the Authority. But the BSA has ordered TVNZ to make a public statement summarizing the Authority’s findings, pay the Samoa government costs of \$5000 and the Crown another \$2000 in costs.

Government Press Secretariat