

26 sworn in as Tongan citizens

By SUE GREEN

THE man responsible for Tonga's controversial passport selling scheme, Tongan Police Minister Mr Noble 'Akau'ola, has paid a low key visit to Hongkong to swear in 26 local passport buyers as Tongan citizens.

Mr 'Akau'ola - the subject of legal action and resignation calls over his involvement in the scheme - and two Tongan police superintendents slipped into Hongkong earlier this month to interview the 26 whose existing passports were full and awaiting renewal.

After confirming their identity, he swore them in to validate the citizenship conferred on them by Tonga's parliament in February - a move needed because the scheme under which the passports were sold was found to be constitutionally invalid.

Former Philippines first lady Mrs Imelda Marcos, jailed Hongkong Stock Exchange former head Ronald Li Fook-shiu and local textile billionaire Mr Chen Din-hwa were among the

buyers of the 426 controversial passports sold for a US\$20,000 (HK\$156,000) investment in Tonga under a scheme initiated in 1984 by Tonga's King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV.

But they were not among those sworn in, Tonga's local consul, Mr George Chen, said. All 426 must undergo a new swearing-in ceremony when they apply to renew their passports. They are not required to renounce other citizenship.

Mr Chen's Ice House Street consulate continued selling the passports after the scheme was revoked in 1988 - an action Mr Chen has blamed on a communication breakdown. Now, as it faces competition from other countries including Honduras and Czechoslovakia in the lucrative passport sales market here, Mr Chen is to visit Nukua'lofa next week to plead for a drop in the price of his latest scheme.

Only four passports have been sold under the new US\$50,000 Tongan national passports scheme which give the

right of a year's residence in the tiny Pacific island kingdom.

"We would like to have a more equitable investment price. I hope it will be in the region of US\$35,000 to US\$40,000," Mr Chen said.

He said Tonga had been selling passports here since 1982 and the newcomers lacked its experience in devising passport sales schemes. Its share of the Hongkong market would not be hit.

Meanwhile, Mr Chen's consulate is still selling 10 to 20 Tongan Protected Persons Passports (TPPP) a month at US\$16,000 for an individual or US\$20,000 for a family. The TPPP was its original scheme which gives no right of residence and so was refused recognition by many countries including Australia, New Zealand and the US.

Mr Chen said it was recognised by Hongkong, China, Macau, Britain and several Asian countries so was useful for many Hongkong business people.