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Plea-bargaining for Scientologists approved by judge

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Nine scientologists, who faced a 28-count indictment on charges of stealing government documents, each would plead guilty to only one count of conspiracy under an agreement upheld by a federal judge.

U.S. District Judge Charles Richey ruled Monday that the disputed plea arrangement between defense and prosecution attorneys is valid. Chief prosecutor Raymond Banoun promptly said the U.S. attorney's office would file a notice of appeal.

Richey had held closed hearings for nearly two weeks on the defense contention — disputed by the prosecution — that government lawyers agreed to the plea arrangement.

He issued the ruling just 24 hours before the Church of Scientology members were to stand trial on all counts.

The scientologists were charged with "willfully and knowingly" conspiring to in-

filtrate federal agencies from 1973 to 1977 and stealing thousands of documents, including Internal Revenue Service files.

Much of the case was built around documents seized in FBI raids on church headquarters in Los Angeles and Washington on July 8, 1977.

Prosecutors say warrants for the raids were obtained after two church members were caught using false identification to gain access to the U.S. Courthouse in Washington. One of the two turned government witness.

Richey ordered lawyers for both sides to appear Friday "whereupon the court will pronounce its findings with respect to guilt or innocence of each of the accused" based on evidence prosecutors were to submit this week.

Lawyers for the church members, including Mary Sue Hubbard, wife of church founder L. Ron Hubbard, had negotiated with

prosecutors over a possible plea in September, days before they were to stand trial originally.

Under the plea agreement, Mrs. Hubbard, of Sussex, England, second in command of the church, would plead guilty to conspiring to obstruct justice along with church members Henning Heldt of Los Angeles; Duke Snider and Cindy Raymond of Hollywood; Richard Weigand of Van Nuys; Gregory Willardson of Beverly Hills, and Gerald Wolfe of Areleta.

Mitchell Hermann of Hollywood would plead guilty to conspiring to illegally obtain government documents and Sharon Thomas of Los Angeles, who allegedly took a secretary's job at the Justice Department to help the church gain access to offices and files, would plead guilty to a misdemeanor.