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Public Statement

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South Korea: Crackdown against Free Trade Agreement protest leaders

Amnesty International would like to express its serious concern at the arrests of Oh Jong-ryul and Jung Gwang-hoon on 3 July 2007 on charges of protesting against the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (Korea-US FTA).

Mr Oh and Mr Jung are Co-Chairs of the Korean Alliance against the Korea-U.S. FTA (KoA), a broad alliance of about 300 different civil society and social movement groups in South Korea which is committed to peaceful protest against the trade agreement which was signed by President Roh Moo-hyun and George W Bush on 30 June 2007.

They were arrested on charges of carrying out 'illegal' and 'non/un-permitted' protests though the KoA has reportedly served the requisite notice to the Korean government about conducting the strike. The South Korean constitution (Article 21) does not recognize a permit system for rallies; a notice needs to be given, which the organizers, the KoA, have reportedly done.

69 year-old Oh Jung-ryul and 68 year-old Jung Gwang-hoon are currently detained at Seoul Detention Centre. They are expected to go on trial on 10 August.

Amnesty International believes that the arrests of Mr Oh and Mr Jung are a direct violation of their constitutional right to assemble and express their opinion and that both Mr Oh and Mr Jung are Prisoners of Conscience. Amnesty International urges the South Korean government to release the two men immediately and unconditionally.

The arrests of Mr Oh and Mr Jung comes in the wake of the issuance of 67 arrest warrants targeting senior leaders of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMTU) who spearheaded strikes on 28 and 29 June 2007 against the signing of the Korea-US FTA and whose closing rally on 29 June was part of the strike organized by the KoA.

Background

Since its formation in March 2006, the KoA has reportedly organized peaceful and legal demonstrations against the Korea-US FTA, which it believes is an unjust agreement for the people of South Korea, the U.S., and the world. However, since November 2006, the Roh Moo-hyun Administration has declared all KoA's public rallies illegal. Police suppression has reportedly been severe on all activities of the KoA. AI is concerned that the Roh Moo-hyun Administration has violated fundamental rights of the people to assemble and oppose any unjust government practices.

Mr. Oh was born in 1938 in the city of Kwangju. He helped establish the Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union, for which he was imprisoned in the past. He has also worked for the abolition of the National Security Law, for which he was again imprisoned.

Mr. Jung was born in 1939 in the city of Haenam. He has served as President of the Korean Peasants' League, the national federation of small farmers' organizations.

Following arrest warrants against 67 leaders of the Korea Metal Trade Union (KMTU), their employers have reportedly filed damages claims for losses, resulting in the government opening investigations for possible "criminal obstruction of business" of the KMTU leaders at regional, national and local level because of the strike, thereby opening the path for police interference into union affairs and harassment against union leaders.

