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South Korea: Four more arrests at MBC signal continuing erosion of press freedom

Amnesty International today called for the immediate release of two journalists and two writers at Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) who were arrested Tuesday between midnight and 2am on orders from the prosecutor's office.

The four MBC staff members are accused of spreading false rumours about the dangers of US beef in their investigative programme, PD Notebook, which was aired in April 2008. The programme allegedly sparked the three-month protest last summer against the government's decision to resume US beef imports.

Journalists Cho Neung-hee and Song Il-jun, and writers Kim Eun-hee and Lee Yeon-hee were arrested on Tuesday after returning home from a one-month protest against their prosecution, during which time they refused to answer summons by prosecutors and sought shelter in the MBC building.

The prosecutor's office said that the four will be questioned on whether the "small translation errors" were intentionally made to manipulate the information on US beef in last year's PD Notebook programme.

The day before their arrest, Amnesty International met with three of the four MBC staff members in Seoul. During the meeting, Mr Song explained: "We are taking a stance to protect our freedom of expression and the press, which is protected in our Constitution. The government is trying to intimidate the media into submission, but we refuse to give in. It is our conscientious belief that the government does not have any valid reason to prosecute us, thus, we have decided not to co-operate in this investigation." Amnesty International considers them prisoners of conscience, as they are being prosecuted solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of speech, in violation of South Korea's international legal obligations.

The prosecution against these journalists is jeopardising South Korea's press freedom, as well as the government's reputation. The government's handling of this case seems to be more about intimidation than about justice or truth.

Background

In March 2009, a suit was filed by former Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun and former US beef negotiator, Min Dong-seok, against the journalists and writers of PD Notebook. This was followed by the arrest of two PD Notebook journalists Lee Choon-keun in March and Kim Bo-seul – a few days before her wedding – in April on charges of spreading false rumours and disturbing public peace. They both refused to answer questions and were released within 48 hours.

In August 2008, MBC apologised for translation errors in their PD Notebook programme about the dangers of US beef.

Also in March 2009, four journalists and union activists from YTN, a 24-hour news channel, were arrested for “interfering with business” and later released. They had been protesting the appointment of Ku Bon-hong, a former aide of the current South Korean President, as head of YTN. In October 2008, six journalists, including the three arrested in March, were fired due to their union activities. The prosecution of the four is still ongoing.