

South Korea: Amnesty International welcomes new Human Rights Commission

"The establishment of a Human Rights Commission has scope to be a great step forward for human rights protection and promotion in South Korea," Amnesty International said today ahead of Sunday's inauguration. The Commission was promised by President Kim Dae-Jung in 1998, the 50th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Amnesty International hopes that the Commission will monitor, investigate and offer correctional measures regarding human rights concerns such as discrimination, cases of ill-treatment in prisons, the death penalty and conscientious objection. It will also advise the government on international human rights treaties and integrating them into domestic law; conduct prison visits, give opinions in court, and conduct human rights education.

Although welcoming the establishment of the new Commission, Amnesty International has several concerns on aspects of the Commission's constitution which could limit its effectiveness and independence. The Commission will not be allowed to investigate cases which are already under investigation by government authorities.

As four of the 11 Commissioners are appointed directly by the President there is a risk that they will not be chosen for their human rights credentials and may be perceived as politicising the Commission. Amnesty International believes that the appointment of commissioners should be entirely transparent.

Another concern is that Commission staff will not have immunity from defamation suits when acting in their official capacity which could limit their freedom to address human rights concerns appropriately.

Amnesty International is writing to the President asking him to urgently address these issues and to ensure that the Commission's Secretariat, which will be established over the next few months, will be adequately funded.

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