

EXTERNAL

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9 January 1997

REPUBLIC OF KOREA (SOUTH KOREA) **Threatened arrests of trade union leaders as protests continue**

**Kwon Young-kil, President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)**

**Bae Suk-bum, KCTU official**

**Heo Young-ku, KCTU official**

**Lee Young-hee, Chairperson of Hyundai Trade Union Federation**

**Park Moon-jin, President of Korean Federation of Hospital Workers Unions**

**Chang Kap-deok, President of Hyundai Motor Union**

**at least 14 other trade union leaders**

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Several weeks of protests against new labour and security legislation have now reached crisis point in South Korea. At least 20 trade union leaders have been summoned by prosecutors for questioning in connection with the protests, and riot police have stormed the offices of the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU). To date, the protests have been mainly peaceful, but further violent confrontation now seems likely as the government refuses to reconsider the new laws and the protest leaders face imminent arrest.

Amnesty International is concerned that the 20 trade union leaders may now be arrested and imprisoned for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association. They are accused of "interruption of company business" in connection with the protests, following a complaint filed by the Federation of Korean Industries.

Amnesty International is urging the authorities to exercise restraint in the coming days and to take every precaution to avoid violent confrontation between protesters and riot police. The organization is concerned to avoid the situation which occurred in August 1996 when South Korean students were beaten by ill-disciplined riot policemen after a highly-charged and violent confrontation on the campus of Yonsei University in Seoul.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The new controversial labour legislation was adopted by the National Assembly in a secret session organized by the ruling party on 26 December, in the absence of opposition legislators, who had not been informed of it. The legislation contains restrictions on the rights to freedom of association, which the trade union movement and international organizations had hoped to see lifted. For example, the KCTU will be forced to remain an illegal organization for several years, and teachers and public sector workers will continue to be denied the right to form unions. The ban on "third party intervention" often used in the past to detain trade unionists, has not been fully lifted.

In the same session, the government adopted a law granting sweeping new powers to South Korea's intelligence agency, the Agency for National Security Planning, to investigate anyone arrested under the National Security Law. Amnesty International is concerned that these powers may be used to target political activists in the run-up to forthcoming presidential elections.

South Korea was accepted as a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in December 1996, following its commitment to amend

its labour legislation and bring it into line with international standards on freedom of association.

In early December 1996 the KCTU had called its member unions to ballot for a general strike if the government attempted to pass the new legislation without parliamentary debate. The KCTU comprises some 500,000 members and is the nation's second-largest trade union confederation. KCTU President Kwon Young-kil was adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoners of conscience after a previous arrest in November 1995. The Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the largest confederation, has called on its members to join a two-day strike in coming days.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English, your own language or Korean or your own language:**

- urging the South Korean authorities to take every precaution to avoid violent confrontation between protesters and riot police;

- calling on the authorities not to arrest trade union leaders for organizing the recent protests and to refrain from arresting peaceful protesters;

**appeals to the OECD:**

- calling on the OECD to make urgent protests to the South Korean authorities about restrictions on freedom of association in the new legislation which could result in the arrest of trade unionists for non-violent trade union activities, and about the threatened arrests of trade union leaders.

*Please bring to the attention of trade union activists.*

**APPEALS TO:**

1) President Kim Young-sam

The Blue House

1 Sejong-no

Chongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea

**Faxes: +822 770 0253**

**Telegrams: President Kim Young-sam, Seoul, South Korea**

**Salutation: Dear President**

2) Minister of Labour

Mr Jin Nyum

1 Chungang-dong

Kwachon-myon

Shihung-gun

Kyonggi-do, Republic of Korea

**Faxes: +822 503 9711**

**Telegrams: Labour Minister Jion Nyum, Shihung-gun, Kyonggi Province, South Korea**

**Salutation: Dear Minister**

3) OECD

Secretary-General

OECD

2 rue André Pascal

75775 Paris Cedex 16

France

**Fax: +33 1 45 24 85 00**

**Salutation: Dear Secretary General**

**COPIES TO:**

- Mr Koo Bohn-young, Ambassador to the OECD, c/o Minister of Foreign Affairs, 77 Sejong-no, Chongno-gu, Seoul, Republic of Korea. **FAX: +822 270 2686**
- Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, 4th Floor, Samsun Bldg. 12-1 Samsun-dong, 1-ka, Sungbuk-ku, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
- diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 10 February 1997.