

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **ROK: Presidential candidates should pledge their commitment to human rights**

Ahead of the Presidential elections in the Republic of Korea (South Korea) scheduled for 19 December 2002, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Irene Khan, wrote to all presidential candidates underlining the organization's concerns over the human rights situation in South Korea and urging presidential candidates to make specific commitments to protect and promote human rights.

The letter includes Amnesty International's report "*Republic of Korea: Summary of Concerns and Recommendations to Candidates for the Presidential Elections in December 2002*". The report highlights 12 areas of particular concern and makes recommendations which, if implemented, will advance the enjoyment of human rights for all Koreans.

In the report, Amnesty International welcomed the improvements in human rights in the country over the last decade. In particular, the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission in November 2001 is seen by Amnesty International as an important step forward in increasing human rights protection and awareness of human rights in the country.

"These were significant advances, but legislative reform to ensure that South Korea's laws guarantee fundamental human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association is still lacking," Amnesty International said.

"Trade union leaders who organize strike action and demonstrations to protect their basic rights are often harassed and arrested," pointed out Amnesty International.

According to information gathered by Amnesty International, at least 39 political prisoners continue to be detained under the vaguely-worded provisions of the National Security Law.

Amnesty International also welcomed the unofficial moratorium on executions observed by the present administration. Death sentences, however, continue to be handed down and

there are over 70 prisoners in death row. Approval of a bill calling for the abolition of the death penalty has been pending in the National Assembly since November 2001.

Amnesty International called on presidential candidates to support abolition of the death penalty in law, and to ensure that no further executions are carried out.

Additionally, approximately 1,600 conscientious objectors are held in South Korean prisons. Most of them are Jehovah's Witnesses, who refuse to serve in the military because of their religious beliefs.

"Candidates should recognise the right to conscientious objection to compulsory military service as a fundamental human right and promote the introduction of alternative national service," Amnesty International said.

Ill-treatment of criminal suspects and prisoners by law enforcement officials continues to be an area of particular concern. Amnesty International urges all presidential candidates to support amendment of legislation which permits suspects to be held for up to 50 days without charge.

The organisation called upon the presidential candidates to uphold the fundamental rights of individuals to be protected against all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation, as well as to promote steps to protect vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and asylum-seekers.

The Republic of Korea should also ratify to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which has already been ratified by 81 countries.

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