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EMBARGOED UNTIL 16 OCTOBER 1997

South Korea: Amnesty International puts human rights on Presidential Election agenda

With two months to go before presidential elections in the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Amnesty International today is calling on all candidates to make specific commitments to protect and promote human rights if they are elected.

“There is clearly a need for national security in South Korea but too many South Korean Governments have used the threat from North Korea as an excuse to crack down on opponents. Respect for human rights ensures -- and does not undermine -- stability and security in the country,” Amnesty International said today.

In a nine-page open letter Amnesty International's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, suggested 18 measures which would advance the enjoyment of human rights for all Koreans, while contributing to long-term security and development and helping fulfil South Korea's international commitments. He urged all candidates to make public their positions about each of Amnesty International's proposals.

Amnesty International's open letter is also calling for the release of all prisoners of conscience and an amendment of the National Security Law, in accordance with international standards. It is urging candidates to commit themselves to reviewing the cases of long-term political prisoners who were convicted during the 1970s and 1980s after torture and unfair trial.

"It is unacceptable that modern Korea should continue to neglect these victims of a recent past when there was far less respect for human rights," Amnesty International said, pointing out that all human rights violations, past and present, should be investigated impartially so that victims can obtain justice.

The new President should consider the establishment of an independent human rights commission, in consultation with human rights activists, lawyers, academics and others involved in human rights work, as a means of ensuring that human rights violations are properly investigated. But such a commission must be independent and should not be a substitute for effective legal structures.

Amnesty International expressed hope that the new President will also promote awareness of civil, political, economic and social rights by integrating human rights education into school teaching, and by taking measures to prevent discrimination against women, trade unionists, foreign workers and disadvantaged groups. Human rights training should also be extended to all government officials, law enforcement and military personnel -- especially those who have the power to detain and interrogate detainees.

Candidates should state that they will not tolerate the use of torture or cruel and inhuman treatment by law enforcement personnel. They should also commit themselves to improving prison conditions -- including the provision of better medical facilities -- and to ending the practice of forced "conversion" whereby certain political prisoners are pressurized by prison officials to sign a statement renouncing communism. Candidates should state their opposition to the death penalty.

The new President will need to ensure that South Korea is living up to its international responsibilities. This will mean implementing fully the human rights conventions South Korea has ratified, including the Convention against Torture, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. It will also mean implementing the recommendations made by international experts such as the Human Rights Committee and the Committee against Torture.

Labour laws in South Korea will also need to be amended in accordance with International Labour Organization conventions, so that basic labour rights are protected. The new President should ensure that South Korean companies investing abroad are respecting the basic human rights of employees and that none of South Korea's exports are being used to commit human rights violations in other countries.

As an active member of the United Nations (UN) South Korea also has a responsibility to press for improvements in the human rights situation internationally. Candidates should express support for the UN's work to protect human rights and should pledge to uphold and promote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its 50th anniversary year.
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For further information and a copy of Amnesty International's open letter, entitled: *A human rights agenda for the Presidential Election open letter to candidates*, please contact the International Secretariat or Amnesty International Korea:

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