

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 25/010/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 220
29 November 2002

Republic of Korea: commute death sentences

A group of 56 South Korean law-makers affiliated with Amnesty International petitioned today President Kim Dae-jung to commute all pending death sentences to life imprisonment.

The group launched an anti death penalty campaign in October and plan to deliver the results of the campaign to the president in early December.

Amnesty International welcomed the campaign and urged the President as well as all bidding candidates for the 19 December Presidential elections to take steps towards abolition of the death penalty, including formalizing the unofficial moratorium on the death penalty introduced in February 1998 and expediting passage into legislation of a bill for the abolition of the death penalty.

The bill was supported by 155 members of the 273-member National Assembly, and was submitted in November 2001 to the Standing Committee on Law and Judiciary of the National Assembly for their approval and it appears to have been stalled.

The organization hopes that the new President who will assume office in February will support the abolition of the death penalty in law.

The Republic of Korea (South Korea) has not carried out executions since President Kim Dae-jung took office in February 1998. Reportedly there are 56 prisoners on death row in the country. The last executions took place on 30 December 1997, when 18 men and 5 women were executed without advance warning in prisons across the country. It is still unclear why the authorities chose 30 December to carry out mass hangings, after a two-year period without executions.

Amnesty International is concerned that similar pattern of mass executions could take place this year after the elections in December and before the establishment of a new government in February. Amnesty International calls for the Korean authorities to respect the existing moratorium on the death penalty and the most fundamental of human rights: the right to life.

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