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South Korea: Amnesty welcome but political prisoners remain

The release of political prisoners to mark the 55th anniversary of Liberation Day in South Korea is a welcome step but many prisoners of conscience remain behind bars and should also be released, Amnesty International said today.

"This latest amnesty should not obscure the plight of many political prisoners who remain behind bars nor the fact that the repressive legislation used to imprison them has yet to be substantially reformed," the organisation said.

The National Security Law (NSL) is used to imprison peaceful government critics and should be either substantially revised in line with international standards or abolished.

"Radical reform or abolition of the NSL would prevent further violations and help build confidence in President Kim Dae-jung's renewed commitment to justice and reform," Amnesty International added.

The South Korean government has consistently argued the need for the NSL to counter the military threat from North Korea. However, in the new spirit of reconciliation the government no longer has an excuse for such repressive legislation.

Among the 24 political prisoners and prisoners of conscience released was 38-year-old labour activist, Pang Sok-su, who was serving a three-year prison sentence for forming and joining a group called the Youngnam Committee whose aim was alleged to "benefit" North Korea. Amnesty International adopted Pang Sok-su and eight other members of

the Youngnam Committee as prisoners of conscience and has been campaigning for their release.

The organisation will continue its campaign to release remaining Youngnam Committee prisoners as well as others held under the NSL for their non-violent political and social activities.

Amnesty International also welcomed reports of the commutation of two death sentences but urged the government to take concrete steps towards the abolition of the death penalty in law.

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*For more information or a copy of "Abandoning Justice: The imminent execution of Alexander Williams, mentally ill child offender" (AI Index: AMR 51/121/00), please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566. The report is available in PDF format on Amnesty International's website: <http://www.amnesty.org>
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