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**PUBLIC STATEMENT  
SOUTH KOREA  
TRADE UNIONISTS UNDER THREAT OF ARREST**

As labour unrest escalates in South Korea, Amnesty International is calling on the government of President Kim Dae-jung not to arrest trade unionists for legitimate trade union activities.

Arrest warrants have been issued against dozens of trade unionists, including leaders who have organized strike action this week in protest at mass redundancies. Amnesty International believes that trade unionists have a right to take strike action and demonstrate against government policies affecting their economic and social rights and that they should not be arrested for exercising this right.

The authorities have branded this week's strike action, initiated by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), as "illegal" because it is a protest against the government rather than a workplace dispute. Dozens of the KCTU's trade union affiliates are planning to join a series of strikes started this week by workers from public sector trade unions.

Those threatened with arrest include Yang Kyung-kyu and Kim Ho-seun, co-presidents of the Korean Federation of Transport, Public and Social Service Labour Unions. The two leaders have coordinated the strike action this week and are accused of intervening in the Seoul Subway strike. Over 60 members of Seoul Subway Union also face arrest for taking part in the strike.

Although the strike action is reported to have been peaceful so far, Amnesty International believes the threats of arrest and the massive deployment of riot police at strike and demonstration sites may exacerbate tensions and lead to violence. The human rights organization has called on the police to exercise restraint.

The current financial crisis and business intransigence has placed the government in a difficult position, but to arrest people for non-violent strike action is an extremely harsh measure violating international standards on freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International believes it is especially important to safeguard human rights at a time of economic crisis.

**Background**

Industrial relations have been strained since the onset of the Korean economic crisis in early 1998. Unemployment has soared to over 8% in a country which lacks a social safety net. Although trade union rights have improved in recent years, there are still restrictions on the rights to freedom of association and trade unionists may be arrested for legitimate trade union

activities. During 1998 dozens of the country's top trade union leaders were arrested and put on trial for organizing strike action. In early 1999 the two main trade union confederations withdrew

from a “tripartite commission” set up by the government to open up dialogue between trade unions, employers and the government.

The KCTU, which claims that the government’s restructuring policies are leading to mass redundancies, has called for alternative measures to save jobs -- including a reduction in working hours -- and for improvements in social security. The federation is planning a series of strikes and demonstrations, leading up to a mass rally on May Day.

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