

South Korea: Prisoner amnesty does not go far enough

Today's prisoner amnesty in South Korea - however welcome - does not go far enough, Amnesty International said. The organization called for further releases of prisoners and institutional human rights reforms to prevent further arrests.

"Obviously the release of some political prisoners is welcome, but we are dismayed that so many other prisoners were excluded; the continued imprisonment of so many people for their political views is unacceptable in an open and democratic society," said Amnesty International.

"We hope this is the beginning of a systematic review of other political prisoners' cases. This issue is an important test of President Kim Dae-jung's credibility as a human rights reformer".

The human rights organization expressed dismay that many political prisoners serving long prison terms were excluded, apparently because of their alleged left-wing views. President Kim Dae-jung had earlier said that "communists" would be excluded from the amnesty, although this term has been widely misused in South Korea.

Earlier today, the Ministry of Justice announced that 22 out of 41 prisoners on a representative list of cases presented by Amnesty International had either been released or had their sentences reduced. In fact, only 10 people on the list were released and the list itself was only a sample of cases. Several dozen long-term political prisoners remain in prison. Many of those released were coming to the end of their prison sentences. Only one woman was released.

In February Amnesty International representatives visited Seoul to call for the release of prisoners held for non-violent political offences and long-term political prisoners who were tried unfairly. They also called for an investigation into past human rights violations, including killings, unfair trial and torture.

Since his election, President Kim Dae-jung has committed his government to a series of human rights reforms and has already taken steps to reform the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP) - held responsible for political interference and torture of political detainees. Amnesty International has urged the government to ensure that the ANSP is thoroughly reformed so that it cannot inflict any further human rights violations.

But this week the President was reported to have said his government would not amend the National Security Law in the near future and called on North Korea to make corresponding changes to its Criminal Law.

"It is vital that President Kim Dae-jung amends the National Security Law as soon as possible and in accordance with international standards. Until the law is changed peaceful activists will continue to risk arrest and imprisonment," Amnesty International said. "At least 20 people have been arrested under this law since President Kim Dae-jung's election."

The organization also believes that human rights improvements in South Korea should not be dependent on corresponding reforms in North Korea. "South Korea stands to gain from strengthening its open political system and by exercising greater tolerance of different political views. Security and stability can be enhanced by allowing greater space for debate and North-South contact".

The National Security Law has been widely used to imprison people for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Before today's amnesty, over 300 political prisoners were held under this law, at least 20 of whom were arrested since Kim Dae-jung's election.

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