

HUMAN RIGHTS CRUCIAL TO LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH KOREA

**Press conference statement by
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This year sees the coincidence of two important anniversaries - the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea and the 50th anniversary of the proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Since 1948, South Korea has undergone remarkable economic development, which has transformed the lives of a generation of its people. It has made the transition from authoritarian rule to a more democratic and open society. But the recent economic crisis and ongoing human rights problems should be a reminder to all South Koreans that there is no room for complacency.

Yesterday, I was pleased to meet with President Kim Dae-jung, who lent his support to a worldwide campaign Amnesty International has organised to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

His pledge, along with those of many world leaders and statespeople and millions of people from all regions and all walks of life, will be presented to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan on Human Rights Day, 10 December 1998.

I discussed with President Kim the positive role South Korea could play in support of human rights internationally, shown by its recent work for the International Criminal Court. He agreed would personally support AI's human rights work in other countries, including through human rights initiatives in the region. We discussed specifically Myanmar and East Timor and will be forwarding to him other cases of concern.

I reminded President Kim, however, that human rights protection starts at home.

It seemed to me that he has lost touch with the true reality of the human rights situation in South Korea. His government's failure to stop abuse of the National Security Law, to release political prisoners and to engage in meaningful dialogue with local human rights organisations is fast eroding confidence and trust in his reform program. We urged President Kim to meet with local human rights organisations and victims immediately to hear their concerns.

While the world understands South Korea's special history and current economic predicament, but the time for excuses has come to an end. It is a complete aberration that an open

and developed society of this kind should continue to jail people for their peaceful political activities and beliefs.

Some of these political prisoners are elderly and sick, pose no conceivable threat to South Korea's laws or security, and are now held solely because they refuse to sign an unacceptable legal pledge. Their continued imprisonment is a black mark on South Korea's conscience international reputation.

While Amnesty International has welcomed the release of many political prisoners in amnesties over the past few months, more than 400 remain in jail, most under the National Security Law. President Kim said he would consider our special humanitarian appeal for the release of long term prisoners, many of whom are elderly and sick.

South Korea is not only keeping prisoners of conscience in jail -- each year it is creating more. Since President Kim came to office in February, there have been more than 240 arrests under the National Security Law, most under the vague provisions of Article 7 for peaceful political activities.

They include students, young activists, publishers, workers and others accused of forming "left-wing" organizations, and distributing socialist pamphlets or books, in print or on the Internet. Contacts with North Korea have also resulted in arrests -- in spite of the government's "sunshine policy" which encourages such contacts.

While Amnesty International acknowledges the government's responsibility to maintain security, it has long been concerned that the National Security Law is in breach of South Korea's international human rights obligations.

The National Security Law seems out of control. The government says it will not abuse the law, and yet it continues to be used widely and arbitrarily. The government says the courts provide a safeguard against abuse, but acquittals are rare and have even been overturned by the Supreme Court.

The best guarantee of South Korea's security is to strengthen the foundations of its open political system. Security laws can be **more**, not less effective if they include strong safeguards for human rights. President Kim said that the law would be revised in the not-too-distant future. The question is how many more people will go to jail before then.

Reforms are also needed to ensure that torture and ill-treatment are no longer tolerated and human rights should be included in training for all law enforcement officials. Prison conditions should be brought into conformity with international standards.

The establishment of a national human rights commission, as promised by the government, should improve human rights protection. But the government should not prepare this legislation behind closed doors and must start open public consultation immediately, including with human rights organisations, if the commission is to be effective and enjoy public confidence.

South Korea stands out against the worldwide trend towards abolition of the death penalty. Last year alone, 23 prisoners were executed on the one day, putting South Korea in the big league of executors worldwide.

Yesterday, I urged President Kim, as a former death row prisoner on whose behalf many people from Amnesty International and around the world had appealed for clemency, to commute all death sentences and take steps to abolish the death penalty during his term in office.

Of course this is a very difficult and challenging time for South Korea as it grapples with the effects of severe economic crisis. But human rights require special protection at a time such as this.

Economic difficulties are creating a new layer of human rights violations. Basic economic rights such as employment are being denied to several million people in South Korea. Women and vulnerable groups such as migrant workers are often the worst affected. Trade unionists are again being arrested merely for taking legitimate strike action. The peaceful expression of popular discontent is being curtailed through draconian measures such as the National Security Law.

The economic crisis that has beset the region has showed that sustainable economic growth depends on open government, the rule of law, transparency, accountability and freedom of expression and information.

The UDHR makes clear, and President Kim himself has publicly recognised, that *all* human rights are of equal importance –economic, social, civil and political rights. Securing all these rights will be integral to South Korea's economic recovery and long term sustainable development.

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