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REPUBLIC OF KOREA (SOUTH KOREA): MASS ILL-TREATMENT OF STUDENTS IN
AUGUST HERALDS NEW CRACKDOWN ON "LEFTISTS"

The demonstration at Yonsei University in August 1996 -- which resulted in the arrest of 5,800 students -- should not be used as a pretext to crackdown on so-called leftist groups, Amnesty International said in a report released today, after a recent fact-finding mission.

According to Amnesty International's report, police in South Korea were responsible for widespread and systematic ill-treatment after the students were arrested. Government statements since August have led to a climate of intolerance against people with left-wing views.

"It is alarming that the number of political prisoners has escalated in recent months as the authorities try to stamp out left-wing thought," Amnesty International said as it called for the immediate release of all those detained for non-violent offences.

"The government should accept its share of responsibility for the escalation of violence at Yonsei University and the resulting human rights violations. It should set up an independent investigation into allegations of ill-treatment and publish its findings -- it should also set up a review of police training."

Students detained in August told Amnesty International that they were hit with batons and kicked by police as they were arrested. Female students said that police had grabbed their breasts and other parts of their bodies, and shouted sexual insults. Some students who had no connection with the demonstration were detained and beaten in areas around the campus: their only crime was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

At Seoul police stations students were forced to sit or kneel in the same position for hours. Some were beaten during police interrogation where they were forced to write a "confession". Most were not allowed to telephone their families and some injured students received no medical attention.

Amnesty International is urging the United Nations Committee against Torture to take up the ill-treatment of students when it examines South Korea's initial report under the Convention against Torture, in two weeks' time.

Amnesty International is opposing government plans to increase the investigative powers of the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP), without effective safeguards to prevent the agency from committing human rights violations against detainees. The government says the ANSP needs more power to combat an escalation of alleged pro-North Korean activities by students and others.

"If the government has extra resources, these should be invested in preventing human rights violations instead of creating new ones," Amnesty International said.

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