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North Korea: Detained South Koreans should be released ahead of political celebrations

The North Korean government should follow through on the release of South Korean student Joo Won-moon on October 5, 2015 by freeing three other South Korean citizens ahead of the major celebrations scheduled for the 70th anniversary of the founding of the ruling Korean Workers Party this Saturday.

Kim Jung-wook (age 51), Kim Kuk-gi (61), both missionaries, and Choe Chun-gil (56), a businessman, have all been given life sentences for espionage through judicial procedures that fell short of international fair trial standards. Kim Jung-wook was detained on 8 October 2013 and received his sentence on 30 May 2014. The other two received their sentences on 23 June this year, after being detained by North Korean authorities on 26 March 2015. The North Korean authorities failed to disclose any details about their trial, but showed them “confessing” to “anti-state crimes”, including “conspiracy of subversion” and espionage in media interviews.

While welcoming the release of Joo Won-moon, Amnesty International notes that it is the second time this year that the North Korean government decided to release South Korean detainees shortly ahead of significant dates on the political calendar. On 14 June 2015 the authorities released two South Korean citizens who had similarly been accused of entering the country illegally earlier in May.

International media interest on North Korea generally peak ahead of these historical anniversaries. Amnesty International stresses that the calculated release of individuals who should not have been detained in the first place should not be mistaken as a positive human rights trend. Amnesty International has repeatedly asked that the North Korean government release all foreign nationals detained unless they were charged with a recognizable criminal offense through proceedings that meet international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty.

The North Korean government should also immediately close all political prison camps, as a step to end the systemic human rights violations taking place, and to allow independent human rights monitors into the country.