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Amnesty International urges Korean Leaders to respect human rights.

President Kim Dae-jung and his government must either abolish or amend the National Security Law in South Korea in accordance with international human rights standards, Amnesty International said today following the unprecedented inter-Korean summit from 13-15 June 2000.

The leaders of South and North Korea have signed a joint declaration to end the tense standoff on the Korean peninsula. They agreed on exchanging visiting groups of separated families and relatives, to resolve the issue of long-term prisoners and to expand inter-Korean economic cooperation along with exchanges and cooperation in all fields.

Amnesty International welcomes the declaration which when implemented will improve the human rights situation on the Korean peninsula at the same time.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the North Korean government's secrecy surrounding human rights and its continued denial of access for international human rights monitors. The organization also fears for hundreds of North Korean asylum-seekers who have been forcibly returned to North Korea by the Chinese government. These returnees, who are fleeing a food crisis in North Korea, may face imprisonment and even the death penalty under North Korean Criminal Law. Public executions, inhumane conditions in prisons and detention

centres, and torture continue to be areas of deep concern for Amnesty International in North Korea.

"After the summit, the National Security Law in South Korea could become an obstacle to closer inter-Korean relations," Amnesty International said, "we welcome the decline in the number of political prisoners during President Kim Dae-jung's regime, but the continued existence of the National Security Law carries the threat to suppress political dissent."

Political dissident groups are targetted, and its members arrested and detained under the vaguely-worded clauses in the National Security Law. As of 31 March 2000, 67 out of 88 political prisoners have been detained or sentenced under the National Security Law.

Most arrests that take place today are under Article 7 of the law, which provides for up to seven years' imprisonment on vaguely-defined charges of "praising" and "benefitting" North Korea. The National Security Law provides for long prison sentences and even the death penalty for "anti-state" and "espionage activities" which refer to activities by South Koreans who support or help North Korea. These terms are not clearly defined and have often been used to imprison people unfairly. Moreover, the majority of people arrested under the National Security Law are held for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. In addition, Article 10 of the Law deals with those who fail to inform the investigating authorities of espionage agents sent by North Korea.

In October-November 1999, after its consideration of South Korea's initial report under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, ratified by South Korea), the UN Human Rights Committee recommended that South Korea "phase out the National

Security Law". It also called on the Korean government to "urgently amend Article 7 so as to make it compatible with the Covenant".

Amnesty International believes that respect for freedom of expression and association will be important for helping promote mutual understanding in the development of inter-Korean relations. It urges the South Korean government to take the lead in consolidating the gains of the summit accord and abolish, or completely revise, the National Security Law in accordance with international standards. Amnesty International also calls on the North Korean government to end the secrecy surrounding human rights and allow access for international human rights monitors.

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