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SOUTH KOREA: GOVERNMENT'S NEW POLICIES COULD CAUSE FURTHER HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

New security and labour laws passed in a secretive parliamentary session by South Korea's ruling party will lead to further human rights violations in 1997, Amnesty International warned today, as it urged the government not to arrest workers demonstrating against the laws.

"The protesters have legitimate concerns about the restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and association contained within these laws," Amnesty International said. "Anyone arrested for peacefully protesting would be considered a prisoner of conscience."

While international concern has focused on the new labour legislation, the human rights organization opposed new powers given to the Korean Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP).

"The ANSP has been given back the very same powers which were taken away from the agency two years ago because of its poor human rights record. There is nothing to suggest that the agency has changed since then," the organization said.

The government says the ANSP needs new powers to investigate people detained under Articles 7 and 10 of the National Security Law in order to counter North Korea's spying activities. But the vast majority of people detained under these articles are held for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association.

South Korea's labour legislation still has repressive provisions, such as the ban on "third party intervention" in labour disputes, which has been redefined, but not removed in practice. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, with some 500,000 members, will still be illegal for the foreseeable future, and government employees and teachers continue to be denied the right to form a trade union. Workers taking illegal strike action can be imprisoned for three years.

The government maintains that labour reforms are necessary if South Korea is to retain its competitiveness in the global market, but Amnesty International believes that economic development should not come at the expense of internationally recognized human rights for workers.

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