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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Republic of Korea (South Korea): Amnesty International welcomes prisoner releases but expresses concern about continued National Security Law arrests

The release yesterday of 56 political prisoners has been welcomed by Amnesty International, but the organization expressed concern that over 190 other political prisoners remain behind bars, many held under the National Security Law which is still being used to crack down on students and political activists.

Among those released were 66-year-old Ahn Jae-ku and 70-year-old Yu Rak-jin, who were serving long sentences under the National Security Law and had been adopted by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience.

But many other political prisoners were denied freedom. Among those who continue to be held are nine labour and political activists arrested last year on charges of forming the "Youngnam Committee", alleged to be pro-North Korean. Amnesty International will continue to campaign for the release of these nine prisoners, and all others held under the National Security Law for non-violent political and social activities.

Addressing the country on the 15 August independence anniversary, President Kim Dae-jung said again that the National Security Law would be revised. Amnesty International welcomes the President's renewed commitment to reform, but believes it must be carried out immediately if further violations are to be avoided. The organization has repeatedly called for the National Security Law to be either substantially amended in line with international standards or abolished.

Use of the National Security Law is arbitrary and is also inconsistent with the government's "sunshine policy", in which it has allowed more civilian contacts with North Korea. In recent days prosecutors have reportedly threatened to bring National Security Law charges against a group of trade unionists who visited North Korea for a football match, even though the visit had been given prior government authorization.

While many ordinary people were permitted to form a human chain between Seoul and the border village of Panmunjom on 15 August, thousands of riot police were deployed at Seoul National University to prevent students from marching towards the border and several hundred students were detained in the course of resulting clashes.

Amnesty International also welcomed the reported commutation of several death sentences, but called on the government to take concrete steps towards abolition of the death penalty in law.

The human rights organization acknowledges improvements in South Korea's human rights record over the past year, but does not believe there is any room for complacency. The

organization believes that continued misuse of the National Security Law to detain students, labour activists and others for non-violent activities is an example of the need for substantial and lasting human rights reforms.

Background:

Over 200 political prisoners have been released in a series of amnesties since President Kim Dae-jung took office in February 1998, including many long-term political prisoners. Amnesty International has welcomed these, and other steps to improve human rights in South Korea.

However, the human rights organization continues to call for the release of all political prisoners held for non-violent political and social activities and the amendment of several laws, including the National Security Law, which violate fundamental rights.

In September 1998 President Kim Dae-jung told Amnesty International that the National Security Law would be amended. He also said that he opposed the death penalty but that further public consultation was needed before it could be abolished.

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