

AI INDEX: ASA 25/25/98
23 JULY 1998

South Korea: National Security Law used to crack down on union protests

President Kim Dae-jung should respect human rights and live up to his image as a "human rights President", Amnesty International urged in a letter to the president today following yesterday's arrests under the National Security Law of 25 trade union leaders, youth and democracy activists.

The 25 are accused of forming a pro-North Korean organization and inciting labour unrest. The arrests coincide with a general strike and threats from government ministers to crack down on strikers and demonstrators.

"This apparent attempt to link trade union unrest to alleged 'pro-North Korean' activities is alarming and indicates a return to authoritarian methods of stamping out dissent," Amnesty International said.

"In the past we documented many cases where the National Security Law was used to crack down on domestic opposition at times of civil unrest. We are disappointed to see this pattern continue under the new government, given its commitment to human rights protection."

In the past week alone Amnesty International has also called for the release of five other key trade union leaders, including the Secretary General of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions who was arrested on charges of calling "illegal" strike action. Dozens of other trade union leaders have been forced into hiding.

Amnesty International believes that further social unrest and a tough government response is likely to result in more arrests for "illegal" strike action and demonstrations and on national security charges. It also warned that the National Security Law should not be used further to stifle political debate during this critical period.

The organization is calling for the release of detained activists and trade unionists who are held for their non-violent political and trade union activities. It has strongly urged the government to respect the rights of trade unionists and others who oppose government policy.

Since President Kim took office in February more than 100 people have been arrested under the National Security Law, mostly for "praising" and "benefitting" North Korea and in violation of their rights to freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International now fears that officials will be increasingly tempted to use the law inappropriately to crack down on those who disagree with the government's economic policy and political ideology.

"It is crucial that fundamental rights are not sacrificed in the name of economic reform. President Kim should ensure that during the economic crisis people are free to express their political opinions, to take legitimate strike action and to protest peacefully without fear of arrest or other sanctions," Amnesty International said.

ENDS.../