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South Korea: National Security Law arrests increase in the build up to presidential elections

The South Korean authorities should not use the National Security Law to arrest anyone who is simply deemed to be an ideological "threat" to the state in the run-up to the presidential election in December, Amnesty International said today.

Between January and early July 1997 at least 290 people were arrested under the National Security Law which prohibits activities judged to be pro-North Korean.

"As many as 100 more people have been arrested so far this year than during the same period in 1996," Amnesty International said. "Many of those arrested belonged to small, left-wing groups and posed no real threat to state security. Those detained for non-violent activities should be released immediately."

Most arrests were under Article 7 of the National Security Law which punishes those who "praise" or "benefit" North Korea. It is often used to detain people with left-wing views, especially those with political opinions and ideas about Korean reunification which are considered similar or identical to those of communist North Korea.

Most of the 290 were arrested by the police. They included 20 members of Saminchong -- union of socialist youth -- who were arrested in March and April for forming a group which "benefits" the enemy. Several members of the Labour Political Solidarity Group, arrested in May and June, were accused of forming a workers' political party with communist views and holding ideological study sessions for workers.

Three students from Duksung Womens' University were arrested in February because they received a New Years' greeting from North Korean students. Five members of Pomminnyon -- pan-national alliance for reunification of Korea -- were arrested in July for sending money for famine relief to North Korea.

The recent arrests occurred against a background of student protests which escalated in late May when violent clashes resulted in the deaths of three men, two of whom were allegedly killed by students. Since then at least 240 students have been arrested, mostly on charges relating to holding unauthorized demonstrations and violence. The authorities have defined Hanchongnyon (the national association of university student councils) as an "enemy benefiting" organization under the National Security Law.

"We do not condone student violence. But the confrontation with Hanchongnyon has led to a more general crackdown, resulting in the arrests of students and former students for peaceful activities and on charges unrelated to the demonstrations," Amnesty International said.

"The authorities appear to have deliberately confused the public's fear of North Korea with public concern about student violence and have used this to justify increased use of the National Security Law."

The threat of even more arrests was made clear in early July when the Agency for National Security Planning, ANSP (South Korea's intelligence gathering agency) said it was investigating a number of South Koreans on the basis of information given to them by North Korean defector Hwang Jang-yop. Amnesty International fears that some people may be investigated and detained by the ANSP solely on account of their political views.

In a controversial session last December the National Assembly passed legislation which gave the ANSP new powers to detain and question political suspects under the National Security Law. Amnesty International is concerned that the ANSP may try to misuse its powers of arrest and investigation to detain or discredit government opponents in the run-up to the Presidential election in December. The ANSP has been responsible for many human rights violations in the past including dozens of arrests in a largely-fabricated "spy" case announced just before the 1992 Presidential election.

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