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## **Republic of Korea (South Korea): Amnesty International reiterates human rights call to candidates**

Amnesty International today reiterated its call to candidates in the South Korean Presidential election to make clear and unequivocal commitments on human rights.

This follows public debate in South Korea sparked off by Presidential election candidate Kim Dae-jung who committed himself to releasing only certain categories of prisoners of conscience. In the past few days the Ministry of Justice, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Agency for National Security Planning have joined in the human rights debate, denying that there are prisoners of conscience in South Korea.

"Plenty of prisoners in South Korea fall into the category of prisoner of conscience -- including people with left-wing views," Amnesty International said today. "Claims by the authorities that all prisoners held under that National Security Law are a security threat and that they support violence are untrue and misleading."

Amnesty International, the worldwide human rights organization, coined the term "prisoners of conscience" when it began its work in 1961. Since then, the term has found wide acceptance in human rights circles, the United Nations (UN) system and among governments.

Amnesty International defines prisoners of conscience as people who are detained anywhere for their beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, birth or economic status -- provided they have not used or advocated violence. Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all such prisoners of conscience who have been denied their basic rights, guaranteed under international law

More than 500 people have been arrested under the National Security Law this year alone, including prisoners of conscience. Many were charged with no more than "praising" and "benefitting" North Korea -- because they have ideas or views which appear to be similar to those of the North Korean Government.

Amnesty International does not call for the release of political prisoners who have been involved in violence, such as students involved in violent anti-government demonstrations. But it does call for all political prisoners, including student demonstrators to be tried fairly, in accordance with international standards. When it lacks sufficient information to say that someone is a prisoner of conscience, the organization says that he or she is a "possible" prisoner of conscience and calls on the authorities to review the case.

In some cases the term prisoner of conscience has included people convicted of espionage. For example, there are dozens of long-term prisoners who were detained during the 1970s and 1980s for vaguely-defined security offences, but who are really held for political reasons and have not used or advocated violence.

"Amnesty International does not support or oppose any political party. Its views are based firmly on basic human rights which are guaranteed under international law," the human rights organization said. "Everyone is entitled to these rights, whatever their political views."

On 16 October, Amnesty International issued an open letter to all candidates in the forthcoming presidential elections urging them to make human rights a part of their election promises.

Amnesty International is calling on all candidates for the presidential elections to commit themselves to:

- Amending the National Security Law in accordance with international standards;
- Releasing prisoners of conscience and reviewing the cases of long-term political prisoners who were convicted unfairly in past decades;
- Introducing practical measures to safeguard human rights, including the prevention of torture and ill-treatment and investigation of all reported human rights violations;
- Implementing fully the international conventions which South Korea has ratified, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees;
- Promoting the importance of all human rights throughout South Korean society and pressing for improvements in the human rights situation internationally.

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