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## **South Korea: Amnesty International condemns mass executions**

As 23 people were executed on 30 December, Amnesty International condemned South Korea's secretive and arbitrary death penalty system and called on the President-elect to take steps to abolish the death penalty.

The 18 men and 5 women were executed without advance warning in prisons across the country. It is unclear why the authorities chose 30 December to carry out mass hangings, after a two-year period without executions.

Ministry of Justice officials are reported to have said that the executions were needed to maintain security and that there were too many prisoners under sentence of death.

"The selection of prisoners for execution appears to be arbitrary and the lack of advance warning is extremely cruel, both to the prisoners and to their families," Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on President-elect Kim Dae-jung, who takes office next February, to support the abolition of the death penalty in law. Pending abolition, Amnesty International urges the authorities to end the secrecy surrounding executions.

Some 50 prisoners are under sentence of death in South Korea, most of them convicted of murder. They include prisoners said to have been ill-treated during police questioning and who may not have had a fair trial. Executions are carried out sporadically and prisoners live in constant fear, never knowing when they will be executed.

Former President Chun Doo-hwan was sentenced to death in August 1996, partly for the killings of pro-democracy protesters at Kwangju in 1980. His sentence was later commuted and in December 1997 he was released from prison.

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