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SOUTH KOREA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL APPEALS TO GOVERNMENT TO HALT DETERIORATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

Despite images of progress in South Korea, patterns of serious violations persist, Amnesty International said today, following a three-week fact-finding visit to Seoul and Kwangju.

Amnesty International delegates investigated recent reports of arrests and ill-treatment of political detainees, including thousands of students who were arrested and beaten by police after a violent confrontation at Yonsei University campus during August. Police interrogated students for up to two days, forcing them to kneel with bowed heads, and beating them during questioning. Detained female students were subjected to sexual harassment.

“South Korean police are in dire need of discipline and training when it comes to human rights,” Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization also expressed concern about the government’s plan to increase the investigative powers of the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP, South Korea’s intelligence agency), which had been taken away from the agency because of its poor human rights record and lack of accountability.

“In the past the ANSP has been responsible for serious human rights violations,” Amnesty International said “recent testimonies show that nothing has changed.”

There were more than 300 arrests under South Korea’s National Security Law during the first nine months of 1996 – an increase on previous years. Many of those arrested were accused of belonging to allegedly pro-North Korean study or discussion groups.

“The imprisonment of people for reasons of conscience continues to belie South Korea’s reputation as an open, democratic society,” the organization said.

Most political prisoners are held in tiny, unheated cells, with a poor diet and inadequate medical provision. Some long-term political prisoners are not allowed any contact with other prisoners. During their visit the Amnesty International delegation obtained written authorization from the Ministry of Justice to visit two long-term political prisoners, Kang Hui-chol and Kim Yun-su. However, on their arrival at the prison the meeting was denied on the grounds that the delegation had not fulfilled the ‘procedural requirements’ for such a visit.

Impunity for past and current human rights violations is a continuing problem in South Korea. Only ex-presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo and a few other officials have been brought to justice for the killings of civilians in Kwangju in 1980. Many officials escaped prosecution and other human rights violations committed under the military governments have gone largely unpunished.

“Until South Koreans from all walks of life insist on accountability, the country’s past will continue to haunt the present,” Amnesty International said.

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