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## **Republic of Korea (South Korea): Possible release of two former presidents should not obscure truth about past human rights violations**

Any decision by South Korean President Kim Young-sam to release two of his predecessors should not be an excuse for allowing human rights violations committed under previous governments to remain unresolved, Amnesty International said today.

In the run-up to December's Presidential election the human rights organization is calling on both government and opposition parties to remember that there should be impartial investigations into the killings in Kwangju in May 1980, widespread torture, political arrests and unfair trials under previous governments.

"The release of the two former prisoners may help to bring about reconciliation in South Korea, but should not overshadow the need for truth about the past," Amnesty International said. "The government should order an independent investigation of past violations and ensure that victims obtain justice."

The authorities arrested thousands of people for political offences during the 1980s and early 1990s when former Presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were in office. Amnesty International documented the widespread use of torture and unfair trials. One of South Korea's most serious and widely-reported human rights violations occurred in May 1980 in Kwangju city when the military opened fire on civilian demonstrators, killing or injuring hundreds. But there has never been an impartial investigation into these killings and many other past human rights violations which remain unresolved today.

"In recent years rapid industrialisation and democratisation have changed the face of South Korea," Amnesty International said. "But laws and practices from the past have not been changed to match the requirements of a modern, democratic country."

The victims include several dozen long-term prisoners who were arrested during the 1970s and 1980s and remain in prison today. They were tortured, denied access to lawyers and falsely convicted of spying for North Korea but have no recourse under South Korean law.

"The government knows that these people were tried unfairly, but it still refuses to reopen the cases, probably through fear of undermining the current legal system and implicating officials who remain in positions of authority," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is calling on the Government of South Korea to establish an independent body to examine unresolved human rights violations committed under past governments. It should allow the full truth about past violations to emerge and ensure that victims obtain justice. It should also examine laws and practices which originated under past governments to ensure that they conform with international standards.

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