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South Korea: Students arrested as authorities suppress human rights film festival

The South Korean authorities should immediately release two student members of a human rights organization arrested today in Seoul for their involvement in organizing a festival of films on human rights, Amnesty International said today.

The festival's organizer, Soh Jun-shik, was reportedly sought for questioning but was not arrested.

"These arrests are part of a second crackdown against a film festival in less than two weeks and are an attempt by the government to suppress dissenting voices in South Korea in the run-up to the December Presidential elections," Amnesty International said.

Sarangbang, a South Korean human rights organization, had sought to organize a human rights film festival at Hong Ik University in Seoul from 27 September to 4 October 1997. The students, whose names were not immediately known to Amnesty International, were apparently detained with a search warrant issued by a Seoul court to investigate whether the organizers of the festival had breached legislation which makes it mandatory for all films to be screened for censorship purposes by an official committee.

In October 1996 the South Korean Constitutional Court ruled that systematic film censorship was unconstitutional. The films which were to be shown at the festival included documentary films about World War II as well as films from Guatemala, Taiwan and South Korea. The festival's organizers had warned that they would not submit the films to pre-screening censorship.

"The arrest of the two students is of a magnitude far outweighing their role in the film festival and appears to be politically motivated," Amnesty International said.

The crackdown against the human rights film festival takes place less than two weeks after a Gay and Lesbian film and video festival -- organized by homosexual rights activists at Yonsei University in Seoul on 19 September -- was closed down by police. The police also threatened the organizers with arrest and a fine.

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