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Republic of Korea (South Korea): Time to end 50 years of abuse

South Korea's National Security Law will be 50 years old on 1 December 1998, only 10 days before the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This presents an ideal opportunity for South Korea's government to demonstrate its commitment to human rights by ending 50 years of abuse under the National Security Law and releasing more political prisoners, Amnesty International said today.

"While South Korea has changed dramatically since 1948, the National Security Law remains stuck in a time-warp. The law is still being used to imprison people for views and activities deemed 'left-wing' or 'pro-communist'," the organization added. "Students, political activists, trade unionists, publishers, religious figures -- even web surfers are among the hundreds arrested just this year, mostly on vaguely-defined charges of 'praising' and 'benefitting' North Korea."

Amnesty International welcomed the release of over 150 political prisoners in two prisoner amnesties this year. However, several hundred remain in detention, -- some have been held for up to 40 years, much of it in solitary confinement. Many prisoners were denied release in the most recent amnesty only because they refused to sign an unacceptable "law-abiding pledge".

"The National Security Law is an aberration in an open and developed society like South Korea. The country is justifiably proud of its achievements, including its democratic development. But democracy also means allowing people to have and express their own political views. These curbs on freedom of speech and assembly do nothing to enhance state security or the country's international reputation," Amnesty International said.

The South Korean government's continuing failure to initiate reform of the National Security Law is perpetuating a climate of political intolerance, in which supporters of reform are being unjustifiably branded as North Korea sympathisers.

South Korea's President and Minister of Justice have told Amnesty International that they cannot review the law now because of political opposition and the country's economic crisis. While the organization understands such difficulties, the time for excuses has come to an end. Every day of delay brings new victims. Human rights protection is particularly important at a time of crisis and the government must seek to win public support and counter criticism from those who oppose reform.

Successive governments have undermined the fundamental human rights granted to the Korean people in the UDHR through use of the National Security Law. Amnesty International

calls on South Korea to live up to its international responsibilities under the Declaration and the human rights treaties it has signed up to.

South Korea is one of many Asian countries where draconian national security legislation is used to curb legitimate and peaceful political activities and freedom of expression. Malaysia's Internal Security Act has recently been used against political opponents of the government, including Former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Political dissidents continue to be jailed for state security offences in China.

In Indonesia, where the government has claimed that its democratic reforms included moves to repeal the Anti-Subversion Law, the same security offences seem set to be incorporated into the criminal law. Meanwhile, the existing law continues to be used against peaceful political opponents. Sweeping emergency measures and security laws remain in force throughout South Asia, especially in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Throughout 1999, Amnesty International will be campaigning to end such human rights abuses across Asia.

"While Asia is experiencing a period of fundamental political and legal reform, security laws are still constraining the development of civil society and open and participatory political systems throughout the region," Amnesty International said.

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