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SOUTH KOREA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL OPPOSES ARRESTS AND CALLS FOR MODERATION FROM THE AUTHORITIES

As protests against new labour and security legislation escalate in South Korea, Amnesty International today appealed to the government not to carry out its threat to arrest key trade union leaders.

Arrest warrants were today issued for seven of the at least 20 officials reportedly summoned for questioning over organizing strike action and protests, on the basis of a complaint filed by the Federation of Korean Industries.

“Trade union leaders face arrest and imprisonment for the non-violent exercise of their rights,” the organization said. “These rights are guaranteed under international standards to which the South Korean government is a signatory.”

Amnesty International’s members throughout the world have sent letters appealing to the authorities to lift the threat of arrest and respond to protests with maximum restraint in order to avoid any escalation in the violence.

The organization fears that a crackdown on the protesters could lead to a repetition of events in August 1996, when thousands of students and riot policemen were injured, including hundreds of students beaten by ill-disciplined riot police during a highly charged and violent confrontation.

The human rights organization is calling on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to make urgent protests to the South Korean authorities about the threatened arrests and the restrictions on freedom of association in the new legislation.

“South Korea was admitted as a member of the OECD in December 1996 after it promised to bring its labour legislation into line with international labour standards,” Amnesty International said. “It is clearly failing in its obligation to carry out these reforms.”

The new legislation, adopted in a secret parliamentary session in late December, contains restrictions on the rights to freedom of association, which the trade union movement and international organizations had hoped to see lifted. Under the new laws, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the second largest trade union confederation remains an illegal organization, and teachers and public sector workers are denied the right to form unions. The ban on “third party intervention” often used in the past to detain trade unionists, has not been fully lifted.

In the same session, the government adopted a law granting sweeping new powers to South Korea’s intelligence agency, the Agency for National Security Planning, to investigate anyone arrested under the National Security Law. Amnesty International is concerned that these powers may be used to target political activists in the run-up to forthcoming presidential elections. ENDS.../