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REPUBLIC OF KOREA (SOUTH KOREA): AMNESTY CALLS FOR PRISONER RELEASES
IN RUN-UP TO ANNIVERSARY

The Government of President Kim Young-sam should immediately release all prisoners of conscience and stop arresting people for merely expressing their opinion, Amnesty International said today in the run-up to the 51st anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese rule.

The human rights organization makes its appeal prior to the anniversary on 15 August, which has sometimes been used to amnesty political prisoners.

"The authorities' refusal to review cases of unfair conviction under past governments is incomprehensible," Amnesty International said today.

"President Kim Young-sam's reform program has made no difference at all to dozens of long-term political prisoners who have been in prison since the 1970s and 1980s with no apparent hope of release. These prisoners appear to have been forgotten."

There are several hundred political prisoners in South Korea. They include dozens of prisoners sentenced to long prison terms under previous governments, after trials which fell short of international standards.

Long-term prisoners whose cases have attracted international support include Yu Chong-sik who has been in prison for 21 years, Lee Hon-chi who has been in prison for 15 years, and Kim Song-man who has spent over a decade in prison. Amnesty International believes that they and others were convicted largely on the basis of confessions obtained under torture.

More than 200 people have been arrested under South Korea's National Security Law since the beginning of 1996, mostly for membership of youth, student and socialist groups and for dissemination of material deemed to "praise" and "benefit" North Korea. Most were considered by Amnesty International to be held solely for expressing an opinion contrary to that of the government.

They included 11 members of the League of Korean Youth Workers who were arrested on 24 April for publishing and disseminating material deemed to "benefit" North Korea. Others charged for non-violent political offences were teachers Soh Mi-oh and Hwang Yun-mi who were accused of belonging to the Young Patriotic Group. Articles in the group's newsletter about reunification and a "pan-national" rally were deemed to violate the National Security Law.

On 8 August human rights activists in South Korea have launched a campaign to secure the release of political prisoners and the repeal of the National Security Law. Several hundred political prisoners are reported to have started a simultaneous hunger strike.

Amnesty International has called on successive South Korean Governments to amend the National Security Law, which provides long prison terms for people who are merely exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association, without use or advocacy of violence. The organization has also called for the amendment of legislation used to curb workers' rights.

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