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Republic of Korea (South Korea): Human rights crucial to long term development

SEOUL – President Kim needs to move beyond rhetoric if he is to leave a lasting legacy of human rights reform in South Korea, an Amnesty International delegation visiting the country said today.

“President Kim seems to have lost touch with the true state of human rights in South Korea,” said Pierre Sané, Secretary General of the worldwide human rights organization at a press conference in Seoul.

“His government’s failure to stop abuse of the National Security Law, to release political prisoners and to engage in meaningful dialogue with local human rights organizations is fast eroding confidence and trust in his reform program.”

Yesterday President Kim Dae-jung lent his support to a worldwide campaign Amnesty International has organised to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. President Kim also said he would personally support Amnesty International’s human rights work in other countries, including through human rights initiatives in the region.

According to Amnesty International, South Korea should also remember that human rights protection starts at home.

“While the world understands South Korea’s special history and current economic predicament, the time has come to end the excuses. It is a complete aberration that an open and developed society of this kind should continue to jail people for their peaceful political activities and beliefs,” Mr Sané said.

“Some of these political prisoners are elderly and sick, pose no conceivable threat to South Korea’s laws or security, and are now held solely because they refuse to sign an unacceptable legal pledge. Their continued imprisonment is a black mark on South Korea’s conscience and international reputation.”

While Amnesty International has welcomed the release of many political prisoners in amnesties over the past few months, it noted that more than 400 remained in jail, most under the National Security Law. Mr Sané made a special humanitarian appeal for the release of long term prisoners, some of whom are elderly and sick.

“South Korea is not only keeping prisoners of conscience in jail -- each year it is creating more.” Mr Sané said. “Since President Kim was inaugurated, there have been over 240 arrests under the National Security Law, most under the vague provisions of Article 7 for peaceful political activities.”

Political prisoners include students, young activists, publishers, workers and others accused of forming “left-wing” organizations, and distributing socialist pamphlets or books, in print or on the Internet. Contacts with North Korea have also resulted in arrests -- in spite of the government’s “sunshine policy” which encourages such contacts.

Mr Sané acknowledged the government’s responsibility to maintain security, but said the National Security Law is in breach of South Korea’s international human rights obligations.

“The National Security Law seems out of control. The government says it will not abuse the law, and yet it continues to be used widely and arbitrarily. The government says the courts provide a safeguard against abuse, but acquittals are rare and have even been overturned by the Supreme Court.”

Mr Sané welcomed President Kim’s assurance during their meeting that the National Security Law would be revised in the not-too-distant future and urged the government to move quickly to bring the law into line with international standards.

According to Amnesty International, reforms are also needed to ensure that torture and ill-treatment are no longer tolerated and human rights should be included in training for all law enforcement officials. Prison conditions should be brought into conformity with international standards.

Mr Sané also pointed out that South Korea stands out against the worldwide trend towards abolition of the death penalty. Last year alone, 23 prisoners were executed on the one day, putting South Korea in the big league of executors worldwide.

“Yesterday, I urged President Kim, as a former death row prisoner on whose behalf many people from Amnesty International and around the world had appealed for clemency, to commute all death sentences and take steps to abolish the death penalty during his term in office,” he said.

Mr Sané also pointed out that economic difficulties are creating a new layer of human rights violations in South Korea, as thousands of unemployed Koreans have been left without a livelihood. Women and vulnerable groups such as migrant workers are often the worst affected. Trade unionists are again being arrested merely for taking legitimate strike action, and the peaceful expression of popular discontent is being curtailed through draconian measures such as the National Security Law.

“The economic crisis that has beset the region has showed that sustainable economic growth depends on open government, the rule of law, transparency, accountability and freedom of expression and information,” Mr Sané argued. “Securing civil and political freedoms will be integral to South Korea’s economic recovery and long term sustainable development.”

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Cambodia: call for restraint during demonstrations

Amnesty International today condemned the deaths and injuries of demonstrators resulting from the repression of opposition protests by security force in Phnom Penh this week. “We fear an escalation of violence and call on all sides in the current political crisis to exercise restraint, and to make efforts to resolve their differences peacefully,” the organization said.

Security forces are reported to have shot at and beaten a group of Buddhist monks and some students demonstrating close to the United States Embassy today. One Buddhist monk is known to have been killed, while others were injured.

On 8 September security forces violently dispersed demonstrators at different locations in Phnom Penh, shooting into the air and beating people, reportedly using electric batons and water hoses. Suppression of the demonstrations continued this morning in the city.

On 7 September one person was shot dead after police attempted to violently disperse a demonstration in support of opposition party leader Sam Rainsy. Early on that day three grenades were thrown at the residence of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen while he was away; two exploded but there were no casualties.

Second Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that he was ordering the arrest of opposition party leader Sam Rainsy in connection with the attack and for holding illegal demonstrations. He also demanded that the demonstrations end by midnight on 7 September. Sam Rainsy subsequently sought sanctuary in the office of the UN Secretary General’s representative in Phnom Penh, where he remains.

Amnesty International urges that a proper and full investigation be carried out into the grenade attack to bring those responsible to justice. The attack, however, should not be used as a pretext to crack down on peaceful dissent and the right to freedom of expression and association.

"Peoples' lives are yet again being put at risk in Phnom Penh. The use of violence by the police to disperse demonstrators is unacceptable and should be avoided at all costs. It only serves to provoke and increase tension in an already volatile situation," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International also calls on the international community -- including the European Union (EU), ASEAN members and other countries who are part of the Friends of Cambodia group -- to condemn the killings and to firmly urge the Cambodian Government to ensure the protection of human rights and freedom of peaceful assembly and expression.

Background

Opposition parties have challenged the results of the July 1998 election, in which the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen obtained the majority of votes and of seats in the National Assembly. In the immediate aftermath of the polls, scores of opposition party activists fled their homes fearing for their lives, following threats and intimidation from government security personnel. Mass demonstrations by opposition supporters have been

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taking place in Phnom Penh for the last two weeks in protest at reported irregularities in the July elections.

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