

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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South Korea: Death penalty abolition -- historic opportunity

Amnesty International urges members of the Legislation and Judiciary Committee (LJC) in the 17th National Assembly to pass the Special Bill on Abolishing the Death Penalty (Special Bill) which calls for the abolition of the death penalty in the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

In December 2004, 175 members of the National Assembly (which consists of 299 members in total) from the ruling and opposition parties proposed the Special Bill to abolish the death penalty on humanitarian and religious grounds. The Special Bill was introduced in the Legislation and Judiciary Committee in February 2005. Amnesty International welcomes the large bipartisan support for the Special Bill by the National Assembly members and sees this as reflecting the resolve of the 17th National Assembly members towards abolishing the death penalty in South Korea.

Amnesty International unconditionally opposes the death penalty on the grounds that it is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment. The death penalty violates the right to life; it is irrevocable and has been inflicted on the innocent. It has not been shown to deter crime more effectively than other punishments.

A majority of the countries in the world, 120, have abolished the death penalty in law or practice. Since 1990 over 40 countries have abolished the death penalty for all crimes. Among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, all countries except South Korea, Japan, the United States of America (USA) and Mexico have abolished the death penalty for all crimes. Mexico has abolished the death penalty for all ordinary crimes.

Background

Since its independence in 1948, at least 900 people have been executed in South Korea, most of them by hanging. The last executions in South Korea took place in December 1997 when 23 people (18 men and five women) were executed at short notice. There has been an unofficial moratorium on executions since President Kim Dae-jung (who was himself sentenced to death in 1980) took office in February 1998. However, at least six people were sentenced to death in South Korea in 2004 and at least 60 prisoners remain under sentence of death at the end of the year.

In November 2001, 155 members of the last National Assembly (which consisted of a total of 273 members) supported a bill calling for the abolition of the death penalty. Despite this support which constituted over 56 percent of the National Assembly members, there was no progress in the status of the bill; it appears to have been stalled in the LJC of the last National Assembly.

In July 2004, in an Open Letter to newly elected Members of the 17th National Assembly (AI Index No. ASA 25/004/2004), Amnesty International recognised the important role that then-newly elected members of the National Assembly had to play in ensuring that the Special Bill was enacted into legislation. Amnesty International called on the members of the 17th National Assembly to support abolition of the death penalty in law.