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North Korea: General Secretary Kim Jong Il should consider human rights reforms

Today's formal accession of Kim Jong Il to the leadership of the ruling Korean Workers' Party (KWP) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea) marks an opportunity for the country to cast off its isolationist tendencies and to develop dialogue and accountability on human rights issues, Amnesty International said today.

"At a time of severe food shortages and continuing economic difficulties, the interests of all in North Korea would be served by increased contacts with the outside world," the organization said. "Allowing independent human rights organizations to visit the country could constitute a positive step towards the further development of human rights safeguards."

Amnesty International is calling on the new Secretary General to reform policies and practices which violate human rights, engage in dialogue on human rights matters with the United Nations (UN) and others, and open his country to the scrutiny of independent non-governmental human rights organizations.

The organization has long been concerned that North Korean people deemed to be opposed to the policies of the KWP may face detention. People who attempt to leave the country for political reasons may also be imprisoned -- some have already reportedly been executed. Amnesty International also fears that the severe food shortages of the last two years may have led to the increased use of the death penalty, and a grave deterioration of conditions of detention.

North Korea has continually been unresponsive to international calls for human rights dialogue. In August 1997, it took the unprecedented decision to withdraw from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, following international criticism of North Korea's failure to report to the UN on its implementation of the Covenant. Amnesty International visited the country in 1995 but was not allowed to undertake independent monitoring.

Kim Jong Il, the son of former DPRK President and KWP leader Kim Il Sung, is believed to have informally assumed the leadership of the DPRK upon the death of his father in July 1994. The post of DPRK President remains vacant. The Supreme People's Assembly, North Korea's legislative organ, which elects the President, has not met since 1994.

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