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NEWS RELEASE

Republic of Korea (South Korea): A new human rights agenda?

As Kim Dae-jung takes office as President of the Republic of Korea, Amnesty International is calling on him to place human rights at the top of his agenda for reform.

"We are encouraged by Kim Dae-jung's early statements in support of human rights reforms. We urge him to ensure that human rights remain a priority throughout his term in office," said Rory Mungoven, Director of Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Program, at a press conference in Seoul today.

"National security and economic necessity cannot justify human rights violations. Human rights protection is particularly important at a time of crisis -- the new administration should ensure that political, economic and social rights are not eroded during this period of economic hardship and that human rights reforms are not forgotten."

The human rights organization is calling on Kim Dae-jung to implement a series of reforms, including the release all prisoners of conscience and reform of the National Security Law in accordance with international human rights standards. There were more than 600 arrests under the National Security Law in 1997 and several dozen long-term political prisoners have spent up to three decades in prison after unfair trials. They include sick and elderly prisoners, refused parole simply because of their refusal to renounce communism.

Amnesty International is also calling on the new administration to ensure that torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement personnel are no longer tolerated and to order full investigations into reported human rights violations -- including those which occurred in the past. The organization has called on Kim Dae-jung to abolish the death penalty during his term of office.

Amnesty International welcomes Kim Dae-jung's reported statements about human rights, including proposals to reform the Agency for National Security Planning and to establish a human rights commission. It also welcomes his commitment to enhance human rights education and to ensure that South Korean law and practice are in conformity with international human rights standards.

But the organization is concerned that other pressing issues, such as the economic crisis and relations with North Korea should not obscure the need for human rights reforms.

The human rights organization stressed that measures for national security should be consistent with international standards. The threat from North Korea, though real, does not justify the severe and arbitrary restrictions on freedom of expression contained in national security legislation.

Amnesty International also hopes that South Korea will commit itself to improving human rights in other countries, particularly through its work at the United Nations and at other international fora including the Asia-Europe heads of government meeting in April.

"President Kim has long been a champion of the universality of human rights. In this, the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, hope the new President will put that commitment into practice, both in Korea and internationally," Amnesty International said.

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