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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Amnesty International calls for prisoner releases in South Korea

Amnesty International today called for confirmation that a group of 17 elderly long-term political prisoners will be released in a prisoner amnesty later this month, following recent government hints that they may be included. The organization also called for the release of all prisoners held for their non-violent political and trade union activities.

"These 17 prisoners have been held for 30 to 40 years in poor conditions and their release is long overdue. We fear, however, that other political prisoners may be excluded simply because of their refusal to sign a law-abiding pledge" Amnesty International said.

Long-term political prisoners who were denied release last year include Kang Yong-ju and Cho Sang-nok, who were convicted unfairly under past governments. They have said that the requirement to sign the pledge to respect the National Security Law violates their right to freedom of opinion. Others who should be released include Ahn Jae-ku, aged 65 and 71-year-old Yu Rak-jin, both of whom are in poor health.

Political arrests in South Korea under the National Security Law are continuing at an alarming pace - almost 400 people were arrested in 1998 for alleged pro-North Korean offences and some have been given heavy sentences. Fifteen leaders of trade unions, workers' associations, youth and women's groups were sentenced to between three and 15 years' imprisonment in January 1999.

The government has told Amnesty International that the law will not be misused, but abuses are continuing.

"Unless the National Security Law is amended, those released in the proposed amnesty will be quickly replaced and abuses will continue. The only long-term solution is legislative reform", Amnesty International said.

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