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Protect the rights of migrants in South Korea

Migrant workers in South Korea are often subjected to human rights abuses by unscrupulous employers as well as by the government. They are denied rights at work, freedom of association, freedom of movement and the right to liberty and security of person. Take action to protect the rights of migrant workers in South Korea.

Restrictions on freedom of movement

Under current legislation migrant workers are only allowed to change their jobs with the permission of their employer; and work contracts have to be renewed each year.

Many employers have taken advantage of these restrictions to exploit migrant workers: providing no training; making them work long hours in poor conditions; withholding salaries; and seizing official documents, including passports and work permits, to prevent them from looking for jobs elsewhere.

Women, who constitute around one-third of all migrant workers in Korea, are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including sexual violence.

This situation has driven many to work as irregular migrant workers, leaving them at risk of imminent arrest and deportation. In extreme cases some migrant workers have committed suicide.

Denied the right to form a trade union

Migrant workers have also been consistently denied the right to form trade unions. Those who have attempted to form a migrant workers' trade union have been detained and forcibly returned to their country of origin. This is despite the fact that South Korea is a state party to international covenants recognizing the right to freedom of association.

[Read the full report: Republic of Korea: "Migrant workers are also human beings"](#)

AI South Korea has been running a petition to support migrant rights in the country and participated in a demonstration calling for improved rights for migrants, in Seoul on Sunday 17 December.

Join AI South Korea and urge the government of South Korea to support and respect the human rights of all migrant workers.

Dear Prime Minister,

On International Migrants' Day 2006, I would like to draw your attention to Amnesty International's concerns regarding the rights of migrant workers in South Korea.

While recognizing that South Korea has sought to protect the rights of migrant workers there are concerns that the rights of migrant workers continue to be violated.

I therefore urge you and the South Korean government to:

- End restrictions on the right to freedom of movement for migrant workers and provide effective mechanisms to deal with complaints from migrant workers against employers
- Protect freedom of association and the right of migrant workers to form trade unions
- Ratify and implement the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (The Migrant Workers Convention)

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Target contact details

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Case studies

Jeong Yu-hong

Committed suicide after being refused a work transfer.

“Why don't they pay for my work? I cannot go home because I don't have money. I have chosen to kill myself as there is no other way.”

These words were found on a note left by Jeong Yu-hong, a 34-year-old migrant worker from China who had a valid work permit. After enduring 13-hour nightshifts at an embroidery factory in South Korea for four years, she tried to find a job elsewhere.

Both her employer and the government-run employment support centre refused to let her change workplace. The employer claimed that withholding pay for less than three months was not a good enough reason to want to leave.

Jeong Yu-hong quit the job and, after visiting the employment support centre once more, she threw herself under a train in April 2004.

Samar Thapa

Forcibly deported for his union activities

Samar Thapa, a Nepali national, was leader of the Equality Trade Union – Migrants Branch. In February 2004, he was arrested while staging a sit-in protest at Myeongdong Cathedral in Seoul with other migrant workers.

At the time of his arrest investigations had begun into complaints he had submitted to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea concerning human rights abuses against migrant workers.

No other protesting migrant workers were arrested on the demonstration; the police had no arrest warrant and failed to identify themselves.

Samar Thapa was taken to the remote Yeonsu detention centre. He was held there until April 2004 when, without notification, he was deported. He was detained on arrival in Nepal because he had no documents to prove his identity.