

## **South Korea: President's first year in office opens window of opportunity for human rights progress**

Today's announcement that 19 long-term political prisoners will be released illustrates the human rights progress made in South Korea during President Kim Dae-jung's first year in office, despite the current economic crisis and opposition to reform by influential groups, Amnesty International said today.

However, the organization stressed that these positive first steps would only have a lasting impact if accompanied by further reforms and a real commitment to human rights at all levels of government.

"A new window of opportunity for substantial human rights progress in South Korea has slowly opened during the last year. But if key legal and institutional reforms are not introduced soon, this important chance for change could be lost," Amnesty International said.

"At least 270 political prisoners are still held after this amnesty, many of whom were denied release simply for refusing to sign a 'law-abiding pledge' which is not imposed on ordinary criminals. And until South Korea's National Security Law is changed, more political prisoners will be wrongfully sent to jail."

Over the past year, more than 150 political prisoners have been released in two prisoner amnesties. In early 1999 President Kim took the unusual step of meeting the families of political prisoners to hear their concerns. He also agreed to review the draconian National Security Law and to set up a national human rights commission. His government introduced laws to outlaw discrimination in the workplace and to enable teachers to join trade unions. Yet it failed to deliver on several crucial commitments.

"Instead of taking steps to amend or abolish the National Security Law, the government allowed almost 400 people to be arrested under its provisions in 1998, mostly for non-violent political and social activities. Some were given heavy prison sentences. Dozens of trade union leaders were arrested and put on trial, simply for calling two general strikes," Amnesty International said.

No executions were carried out, but no steps were made towards abolishing the death penalty. At international meetings, the government has spoken out in support of universal human rights values, but South Korea could play a far more active role in human rights promotion, both in the Asia region and internationally.

“President Kim himself seems concerned about human rights protection, but he needs to bring his government on board and convince them that this is a worthwhile investment in South Korea’s future.”

“Powerful groups, such as political opponents and even Ministry of Justice officials, seem to be blocking vital changes, such as reform of the National Security Law, curbing political arrests and establishing a truly independent human rights commission.”

The Ministry of Justice has resisted efforts to establish a national human rights commission that is fully independent from government control, as required by international standards.

However, in spite of some disappointments, there are opportunities for change which have not existed before in South Korea. Amnesty International will therefore step up its campaigning in South Korea in March this year, focussing on reform of the National Security Law, respect for workers’ rights and the establishment of an independent human rights commission.

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**A compilation of footage filmed in South Korea in September 1998, when Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Pierre Sané, met President Kim Dae-jung, and former political prisoners, is available on Beta SP. For copies, please contact World Images on +44 117 930 4099.**