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South Korea: Government restraint crucial following threatened arrests

As more than 100,000 South Korean workers took strike action today to protest against mass unemployment, Amnesty International urged the government to exercise police restraint during demonstrations and not to arrest trade union leaders for non-violent activities.

“Workers have a right to take strike action without fear of arrest and to demonstrate peacefully for their basic rights which have been seriously eroded during the economic crisis,” Amnesty International said today. “We are concerned that threats to arrest trade unionists and mass deployment of riot police on the streets of Seoul may aggravate a tense situation -- leading to violence and arrests.”

The human rights organization also fears that unrest created by job losses may lead to a more general crackdown under national security and assembly laws and a deterioration of the human rights situation.

“President Kim Dae-jung’s commitment to human rights is crucial and we hope he has the strength and political will to carry out reforms -- a strong human rights program will be a good foundation on which to build the country’s economic recovery,” Amnesty International said.

The organization has urged the new President to initiate a series of reforms to strengthen human rights protection, including the amendment of national security legislation, better training for law enforcement officials and the creation of a national human rights commission.

Up to two million people have already lost their jobs, as a result of the recent economic crisis and terms of the IMF loan package to South Korea. There is no effective social security system for those without work and an unemployment fund promised by the government is seen as grossly inadequate. Trade unionists report widespread discrimination in layoffs -- women have often been the first targets for dismissal. A Tripartite Council consisting of government, trade union and employers representatives has been welcomed as a positive step but has so far failed to reach agreement.

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