

PUBLIC

AI Index: ASA 25/21/98  
Distr: PG/SC

To: Health professionals  
From: Medical office / East Asia subregional team  
Date: 4 June 1998

## ***MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION***

### **Deaths in custody Republic of Korea (South Korea)**

#### **Summary**

Amnesty International is concerned about three recent deaths in custody in South Korea and the apparently inadequate investigation and/or public explanation for such deaths. AI is calling for an thorough and impartial investigation into all three deaths.

#### **Recommended Actions**

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the authorities listed below:

- o expressing concern at the deaths of Lee Bong-hae (Seoul, 9 December 1997), Byun Young-heum (Seoul, 1 January 1998) and Park Sun-jong (Seoul, 18 February 1998).
- o urging the authorities to take immediate steps to initiate a prompt and impartial investigation into these deaths; the findings should be made public and anyone found responsible should be brought to justice
- o expressing serious concern at reports of alleged torture and ill-treatment in prisons and detention centres and calling on South Korean authorities to make it clear to prison officials that torture and ill-treatment will not be permitted under any circumstances
- o urging South Korean authorities to ensure that all prisoners are permitted visits from lawyers, family and doctors of their own choice

#### **Addresses**

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### **Copies**

Please send copies of your letters to:

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and to diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) accredited to your country

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Deaths in custody</b> <b>Republic of Korea (South Korea)</b></p>
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Amnesty International is concerned by the deaths of three men while in custody or shortly after release. Two of the men had been held in detention centres and one in a police station in Seoul. In all three cases, death appears to be related to the infliction of trauma. AI is calling for all three deaths to be the subject of public and impartial investigations.

#### **The case of Lee Bong-hae**

Lee Bong-hae, aged 42, a casual labourer, is reported to have been arrested on 1 December 1997 on suspicion of theft. He was initially held and questioned at the Seoul Nambu Police Station and on 5 December he was transferred to Yongdeungpo Detention Centre in Seoul. On 9 December, at 9:20 am, he was taken by a detention centre officer to Darim Saint Mary Hospital where he was declared dead on arrival. Amnesty International fears that the death was the result of ill-treatment inflicted by the detaining officers and is calling for a thorough and impartial investigation into Lee Bong-hae's death.

An autopsy by the National Institute of Scientific Investigation is reported to have confirmed the cause of death as a "sudden cardiac arrest". The report also found numerous areas of internal bleeding, bruises and scars on different areas of Lee's body. The areas of internal bleeding included the front of the head, lower abdomen, waist, around the hip, and the upper arms and legs.

The report of the examining doctor at Daelim Saint Mary Hospital reportedly documented several areas of bruising, scarring and abrasions on Lee Bong-hae's body including his left eye, hips, thighs, knees, lower legs, as well as bleeding in his right eye. The doctor concluded that the bruises and internal bleeding had been inflicted a few days earlier.

Lee Bong-hae had been placed in isolation in Youngdeungpo Detention Centre, reportedly because the detaining authorities said he showed signs of mental illness. His family has stated that he had never shown signs of mental illness nor been treated for mental illness. Police officials in Seoul Nambu who first arrested him also apparently failed to observe any symptoms of mental illness during the time that he was under investigation there.

Youngdeungpo Detention Centre in Seoul has reportedly refused to release official documents relating to Lee Bong-hae's case, including details of a physical examination at the time of the prisoner's transfer to Youngdungpo Detention Centre. They have also refused to release the name of the prison guards on duty while Lee Bong-hae was in custody. A lawsuit has been initiated by Lee's wife, Kim Kyoung-suk, against the Youngdeungpo Detention Centre Director and unnamed prison guards who are alleged to have caused the death of Lee Bong-hae.

#### **The case of Byun Young-heum**

Byun Young-heum, aged 50 and unemployed, died on 1 January 1998 at Seoul City Boramae Hospital, two hours after being released from Yongsan Police Station in Seoul. The cause of death given by the authorities was a "heart attack". Byun was arrested for disturbing the peace, and was held in the police station for five days. His widow, Kim, was offered compensation of W50,000,000 (approx).

US\$ 30,000) on 20 January 1998, though officials stated that the scars and bruises on Byun's body were self-inflicted, and that the settlement was "to appease the family of the deceased."

### **The case of Park Sun-jong**

Park Sun-jong, aged 49 and physically disabled, died on 18 February 1998 while receiving treatment at Kangnam City Hospital after being transferred there from Songdong Detention Centre in Seoul on 4 February 1998. Park Sun-jong had suffered three broken ribs and according to a CAT scan carried out at the hospital, had also had a brain haemorrhage. The post-mortem was carried out by Dr Hwang Jok-jun, an eminent pathologist, who reportedly stated that Park's death was likely to have been caused by external injury. Park Sun-jong was serving a sentence because he was unable to pay a 700,000 won (approximately US \$450) fine, following a conviction for violence. Park began serving his sentence at Songdong Detention Centre on 23 December 1997. After the incident, the prison authorities are reported to have claimed that Park collapsed and died after his release from the detention centre.

### **Background information**

For many years Amnesty International has expressed concern at reports of ill-treatment during police interrogation, including beatings, threats and sleep deprivation. While the organization's work has focused mainly on political prisoners, it has become increasingly concerned at reports of ill-treatment of ordinary prisoners held in police stations, detention centres and prisons.

Amnesty International has received recent reports that prisoners in Youngdungpo Detention Centre and Chonju Prison were tied up and held for up to two months as a form of punishment. Eight students held in Kwangju Prison claim to have been handcuffed and beaten, tied up for several days and denied adequate food in October 1997 after they complained about prison conditions. A student arrested by the police on 1 May 1998 for involvement in a demonstration claims to have been severely beaten by police officials and was only allowed to seek medical attention for a serious eye injury three days later.

Medical facilities in South Korean prisons and detention centres are generally poor. Most have only one doctor who also has his own practice and visits the prison once or twice a week. Prisoners are not routinely given a medical examination after they are taken into custody, or given regular and thorough medical examinations during their imprisonment.

Although prisoners have the right to make a complaint of ill-treatment, in practice it is very difficult for them to do so since the complaint must be made through the prison administration. Prisoners who wish to make a complaint of ill-treatment do not usually have access to independent medical advice.