
amnesty international

REPUBLIC OF KOREA (SOUTH KOREA) Arrests of Trade Union Leaders

21 July 1998

AI INDEX: ASA 25/24/98

DISTR: SC/CO/GR

Amnesty International is calling on the South Korean authorities to release five trade union leaders arrested for organizing strike action and to withdraw threats to arrest up to 100 others on the same charges. The strike action, from 14 to 16 July, was called to protest against rising unemployment and the lack of social protection for the unemployed in the current economic crisis. More arrests are expected as trade unions have called for further strike action and peaceful demonstrations from 23 July. Amnesty International believes the trade unionists to be detained for the non-violent exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and association and has called on the government to live up to its commitments under international human rights and labour standards.

The five trade union leaders arrested between 14 and 19 July are Koh Yong-ju, Secretary General of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU); Im Seung-kyu, Chairperson of the KCTU's Seoul Regional Council; Choi Yong-kuk, Chairperson of the Pusan-Yangsan Regional Council of the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF); Jeung Yoon-seung, Chairperson of the Incheon-Puchon Regional Council of the KMWF and Kim Seung-ho, an executive committee member of Hyundai Motor Workers Union.

Arrest warrants have reportedly been issued for up to 100 others, including Dan Byung-ho, President of the KMWF, Yoo Duk-sang, first Vice President of the KCTU; Kim Kwang-shik, President of the Hyundai Motor Workers Union and Kim Ho-seun, President of the Korean Federation of Public Sector Unions.

Before the strike action, government ministers threatened to crack down on the strike action, using the riot police, and court action. Amnesty International understands that the trade union leaders are wanted on charges of "interruption of company business" for organizing "illegal" strike action. The authorities consider the strike to have been illegal because it was a protest against government policies rather than a dispute between a trade union and a specific employer. Trade unionists in South Korea have often faced arrest and imprisonment for attempting to take legitimate strike action, in accordance with their rights under international labour standards. The participants, mainly trade unions affiliated to the KCTU in the metal industry, the public sector and banking, took action to protect their economic and social rights.

Among other things, they are protesting about the lack of consultation on restructuring in the public and financial sectors, rising unemployment, failure to prosecute companies resorting to illegal dismissals, and the lack of social protection for the unemployed.

Following the arrests and threatened arrests of trade union leaders, the KCTU has called for a second general strike and mass demonstrations to take place from 23 July. The trade union leadership has specifically called for demonstrations to be conducted peacefully.

Workers have been the main victims of the current economic crisis in South Korea. Thousands of jobs have been lost in recent months, bringing unemployment figures to around three million in a country with very little social security and unemployment provision. Trade unions report that companies have resorted to widespread discrimination and illegalities during layoffs. They claim to have lost confidence in a Tripartite Council set up by the government earlier this year as a forum for dialogue between government, trade unions and employers.

Amnesty International is concerned that trade unionists are being arrested for attempting to organize legitimate strike action and demonstrations, in accordance with their rights under international human rights and labour standards. The organization is concerned that further social and labour unrest and a tough government response may result in the arrests of many more trade unionists and workers for organizing "illegal" strike action, expressing their views on the economic crisis and organizing or taking part in peaceful demonstrations.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send letters/faxes in English, Korean or your own language:

- expressing concern that the government has arrested or threatened to arrest trade union leaders for organizing legitimate strike action, in accordance with their rights to freedom of expression and association;
- calling on the authorities to release the five trade union leaders held for organizing strike action on 14-16 July and to remove the threat to arrest up to 100 others;
- urging the government not to carry out further arrests of trade union leaders for organizing peaceful demonstrations and strike action from 23 July;
- calling on the government to respect the rights of trade unionists and others to take legitimate strike action, to organize peaceful demonstrations and to express their opinion on the economic crisis without fear of arrest or harassment.

SEND APPEALS TO:

President Kim Dae-jung

The Blue House, 1 Sejong-no,
Chongno-gu, Seoul
Republic of Korea

Fax: +82 2 770 0253

e-mail: webmaster@cwd.go.kr

Minister of Justice Park Sang-cheon

Ministry of Justice
1 Chungang-dong, Kwachon City
Kyongggi Province, Republic of Korea

Fax: +82 2 504 3337

KEYWORDS: TRADE UNIONISTS1 / STRIKES1 /
