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South Korea: Prisoners should be released unconditionally on 15 August freedom anniversary

As the South Korean Government prepares to free political prisoners, Amnesty International is calling on President Kim Dae-jung not to make their release conditional on signing an "oath" to respect the law.

The oath requires prisoners to respect the National Security Law -- a law which is used frequently to jail people for exercising their freedom of expression.

The amnesty should include 17 sick and elderly long-term prisoners who have been held in solitary confinement for between 28 and 40 years, refused release on parole for many years simply because of their imputed communist views. In past decades they were tortured in order to force them to sign a "conversion" statement.

"These elderly political prisoners pose no threat to state security. If the government really cares about human rights it will release them without attaching conditions," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization is also calling for the release of at least 15 other long-term prisoners convicted unfairly on trumped up spying charges during the 1970s and 1980s, including prisoners such as Kang Yong-ju and Kim Song-man. It urges the government to free all other political prisoners who have been held under the National Security Law and other legislation for non-violent activities, including students, trade unionists, and activists.

Reports that at least 100 political prisoners will be released were welcomed by Amnesty International but the organization pointed out that several hundred people are currently held under the National Security Law and if current arrest rates continue, those released will quickly be replaced.

More than 100 prisoners have been arrested under the National Security Law since the new government took office, almost all held for trivial offences such as publishing a "pro-North Korean book", belonging to a small group with left-wing ideas or uploading socialist material on the Internet.

"Maintaining state security does not mean locking people up for having left-wing views or keeping them locked up because they refuse to accept a law which violates fundamental human rights," Amnesty International said. "All we are asking is that South Korea respects the rights to freedom of expression and association which are enshrined in international human rights treaties."

Amnesty International is also urging the authorities to allow students and others to demonstrate peacefully on the 15 August anniversary following reports that some 6000 riot police have been deployed to block a student demonstration at Seoul National University and that 12,000 police will be deployed to prevent a march to Panmunjom.

“The students should be given a chance to demonstrate peacefully,” Amnesty International said. “We are concerned that this huge contingent of riot policemen, and the government’s outright refusal to allow the students to demonstrate or take part in a march, may provoke rather than prevent violence.”

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