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South Korea: Amnesty International's Secretary General appeals for further prisoner releases

The Secretary General of Amnesty International will personally appeal for the release of remaining long-term political prisoners when he visits South Korea next month.

The human rights organization welcomed the publication of 94 names of political prisoners to be released on 15 August but said that the omission of prisoners who refused to sign a "law-abiding oath" remains unacceptable.

"President Kim is to be congratulated for releasing some of the forgotten victims of past human rights violations; we now hope this will be followed by further prisoner releases and human rights reforms," said Pierre Sané, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

The releases will include at least 13 long-term political prisoners who were convicted on trumped up spying charges in the 1980s, three members of *Sanomaeng* (socialist workers league) and six people arrested in a 1992 "spy" case. Amnesty International members had campaigned for these prisoners for many years.

But 17 prisoners held for between 28 and 40 years were among several hundred political prisoners excluded from the amnesty, simply because they refused to sign an "oath" to respect the law -- including the National Security Law which is used frequently to violate rights. For many years the long-term prisoners were denied release because of their alleged communist views.

"When I visit South Korea in early September I will be appealing in person to President Kim Dae-jung to order further releases and to stop arresting people in violation of their rights to freedom of expression and association," said Mr Sané.

The Secretary General will visit South Korea from 9 to 12 September, to discuss Amnesty International's human rights concerns on South Korea and to raise the organization's profile in the country.

More than 100 people have been arrested under the National Security Law since President Kim took office in February and they were also excluded from the prisoner amnesty. Some 360 political prisoners continue to be held, most for National Security Law violations.

Amnesty International also welcomed the commutation of death sentences imposed on two Pakistani men, but continues to call on the government to commute all death sentences and take steps towards abolition of the death penalty.

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