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23 July 2015

Office of President Park Geun-hye of South Korea
Cheongwadae, Sejong-ro,
No 1, Jongno-gu.
Seoul 110-820,
Republic of Korea

via e-mail

Re: Release activists imprisoned for supporting Sewol Ferry demonstrations

Dear President Park Geun-hye,

We write to [reiterate](#) our deep concern over the continued judicial harassment and detention of individuals and civil society activists for organizing and participating in protests commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Sewol Ferry tragedy. The ongoing imprisonment of seven protestors, including respected civil society leader Lae-goon Park, for engaging in largely peaceful demonstrations represents a grave miscarriage of justice and a violation of their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. We urge you to take appropriate action to ensure that all human rights defenders and demonstrators unwarrantedly detained for taking part in the demonstrations are immediately and unconditionally released.

In response to the sinking of the Sewol Ferry on 16 April 2014, in which 304 people, mostly children, died, Sewol families and civil society organizations (CSOs) have supported a number of legitimate advocacy initiatives urging the government to establish an independent investigatory commission to examine the causes and response to the Sewol Ferry disaster. These activities, including hunger strikes, protests, written appeals, statements, and public petitions, were spearheaded by a robust collation of hundreds of civil society groups and families of victims and supported by millions of concerned South Koreans.

However, the government's failure to ensure the effective implementation of a law creating an impartial and transparent commission of inquiry into the Sewol ferry incident has triggered mass demonstrations across the country. We remain deeply alarmed that these demonstrations, which occurred primarily in April and May of this year, have been met with excessive force and judicial persecution of prominent civil society activists and protestors.

As of 23 July 2015, at least seven human rights defenders and protestors remain in prison for taking part in the demonstrations. The arrests of these protestors, including Mr. Hyung-jae Ham, Mr. Hyun-sik Kim, Mr. Lae-goon Park, were reportedly marred by inconsistencies and, in several cases, appear specifically aimed at discouraging further protest action in the country.

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Of primary concern is the recent arrest and detention of renowned activist Lae-oon Park. Mr Park, who is the elected civil society representative of the 4.16 Coalition, a triumvirate alliance comprised of 800 NGOs, Sewol victims' families, and concerned South Korean citizens, was arrested on 17 July on charges of violating provisions of the Act on Assembly and Demonstration, general obstruction of traffic, invalidity of public documents, destruction of public good under the Criminal Code.

Mr. Park, one of the most prominent human rights defenders in South Korea, has repeatedly been subjected to judicial harassment for his legitimate human rights work including being arrested and detained in 2006 and 2009 for peacefully opposing violations of fundamental rights committed by the state. We remain deeply concerned that Mr. Park is again being targeted for his peaceful human rights activism including playing a leading role in the 4.16 Coalition and helping to organize the Sewol protests in April and May 2015.

The recent clampdown on fundamental democratic rights in response to legitimate popular movement in the pursuit of justice, transparency and accountability for the Sewol Ferry disaster represents an alarming failure to address the pressing needs of South Koreans through constructive and democratic dialogue. The continued harassment and detention of Mr. Park and all other civil society leaders and protestors in the country for supporting the Sewol protests calls into question the government's commitment to its national and international human rights obligations to promote and protect the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression.

CIVICUS [joins](#) the growing number of international and national civil society groups calling for the immediate release of all demonstrators and representatives of civil society organisations who have been unjustly persecuted and detained for exercising their fundamental rights.

Yours sincerely

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Secretary General and Chief Executive Officer
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