

For Immediate Release**South Korea: Release human rights defenders seeking truth for Sewol Ferry disaster**

(Bangkok, 21 July 2015) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), a regional human rights group with 47 members across Asia, condemns the recent arrest and detention of human rights defenders who have engaged in demonstrations calling for an independent and impartial investigation into the Sewol Ferry disaster. The regional group strongly urges the government of South Korea to immediately release all human rights defenders, including Lae-goon Park, a long-time human rights defender and co-standing steering committee member of the 4.16 Coalition on the Sewol Ferry Disaster¹.

The arrest on 17 July of Lae-goon Park illustrates the growing hostility of the South Korean government towards legitimate activities of human rights defenders and peaceful protest movements in the country. Park is a well-respected human rights defender and has stood by victims of human rights violations in South Korea for almost 30 years. As one of the leading figures in the 4.16 Coalition on the Sewol Ferry Disaster, his arrest and detention has a significant impact on the Sewol Ferry disaster movement and broader civil society. Since April 2015, when tens of thousands of peaceful protesters held demonstrations across Seoul, commemorating the one-year anniversary of the Sewol Ferry disaster which killed 304 people, three human rights defenders and four protesters have been arrested and remain in detention.

FORUM-ASIA warns that the current crackdown on Sewol Ferry truth-seeking activists, which also included raids on NGO offices on 19 June and excessive use of force against protesters on 16 and 18 April, as well as on 1 and 2 May, is an indication of shrinking democratic space in the country. *“Instead of responding to civil society’s and victims families’ legitimate concerns, the South Korean government is attacking critical voices and their supporters. We urge the South Korean government to immediately cease its crackdown on human rights defenders, protesters and family members of victims of the Sewol Ferry disaster. All those that have been imprisoned while exercising their rights to freedom of expression and of peaceful assembly, should be released immediately”*, stresses Betty Yolanda, Country Programme Manager of FORUM-ASIA.

The regional human rights group has previously called on Geun-hye Park’s administration to respect the [right of the Korean people to seek the truth and demand accountability in relation to the Sewol Ferry disaster. They should be allowed to do so based on](#) their right to peaceful assembly as protected and guaranteed under the Constitution and international human rights law. *“We wish to remind the South Korean government of the recommendation by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Margaret Sekaggya, following her official visit to South Korea in 2013. She advised “to avoid the criminalisation of defenders by conducting a thorough review of laws and regulations affecting the exercise of the rights to freedoms of opinion and expression and of association and peaceful assembly, with a view to bring these laws into compliance with international standards”*, adds Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a Bangkok-based regional human rights group with 47 member organisations in 16 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta and Geneva. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expressions, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

¹ Coalition 4.16 on the Sewol Ferry Disaster - an alliance of victims’ families, individual supporters, and South Korean NGOs.

For further inquiries, please contact:

- Betty Yolanda, Country Programme Manager, FORUM-ASIA, betty@forum-asia.org, +66 994250010
- Sejin Kim (English and Korean), Human Rights Defenders Programme Associate, FORUM-ASIA, sejin@forum-asia.org +66 926347034