

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: EUR 49/003/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 072
22 March 2006

Belarus: Detentions and beatings continue after elections

Large numbers of peaceful demonstrators are being detained and beaten by riot police and anti-terrorist forces in Belarus in what appears to be an attempt to intimidate demonstrators, according to information obtained by Amnesty International.

108 people were detained on the night of 19 – 20 March and a further 20 were detained on 20 – 21 March, according to the Belarus human rights organization Vyasna. The detentions are continuing and no complete figures are available, but Vyasna estimates that in all 400 arrests may have taken place throughout the country.

"The Belarusian authorities have yet again demonstrated a total disregard for freedom of expression. All those that have been detained for the legitimate and peaceful expression of their views must be released immediately," said Heather McGill, Amnesty International's researcher on Belarus.

Many of those detained are being held in police holding cells in Minsk where they face appalling conditions and are not allowed to receive parcels from relatives.

Many detentions are reportedly accompanied by beatings. Of particular concern are minors, who are not detained by police, but, after their age has been checked, are reportedly pushed from the buses in which other detainees are being held before being transported. Some allege that they suffer injuries as a result of being pushed from the buses. Alexander Kasko (17 years old) was reportedly beaten by police and then suffered a broken nose as he was pushed from a bus. He is currently being treated in hospital. His older brother Sergei Kasko has reportedly been given an unusually long sentence of 30 days, and human rights activists are concerned that this may have been done to avoid his injuries being seen. Many of the demonstrators are students who could face expulsion from their universities as a result of their participation.

Most of those detained are charged for administrative offences such as participation in unsanctioned meetings or hooliganism, which carry sentences of 10 to 15 days' detention. According to Vyasna, on 21 March 65 people were sentenced in Minsk to three to 15 days for administrative offences.

There have also been a number of arrests of foreign observers. On 20 March, three Georgian citizens, Malkhaz Songulashvili, a baptist bishop, and two orthodox priests, Basil Kobakhidze, and Vladimir Gogishvili were arrested at demonstrations in Minsk. They were reportedly deported late Tuesday night. A Polish parliamentarian, Yaroslav Yageilo, was detained by the KGB in Minsk and deported on 22 March. Two unofficial Estonian election observers, Erik Mora and Tarmo Lecht, were also arrested.

Amnesty International calls on the Belarusian authorities to release all those who have been detained for the legitimate and peaceful expression of their views. The organization also calls on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that international human rights standards are fully observed during policing operations, and that demonstrators are not subjected to beating or other forms of ill-treatment.

Background

According to official results President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected for a further five years with a majority of over 82 per cent on 19 March. The opposition claims that the elections were rigged and has called on the population to demonstrate calling for a re-run of the elections. The OSCE election observation mission has stated that the elections did not meet OSCE commitments and international electoral standards and that the "arbitrary abuse of state power, obviously designed to protect the incumbent President, went far beyond acceptable practice".

Demonstrators have set up tents in October Square in Minsk and according to some estimates 10,000 people demonstrated on the night of the elections. Similar demonstrations are being held in other cities. Despite threats by the KGB chief that those participating in demonstrations after the elections on 19 March would be considered terrorists and could face the death penalty, the police have avoided open confrontation with the demonstrators on October Square in Minsk and are detaining people as they arrive and leave the square and charging them with administrative offences.

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