

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Belarus: And then there were none

Amnesty International today condemned the closure by the Belarusian authorities of one of Belarus' most prominent human rights organization, *Spring-96*, as a further attempt to suppress what remains of the country's human rights community.

"Throughout 2003 human rights defenders in Belarus have faced a heightened campaign of harassment and intimidation by the authorities aimed at silencing them. *Spring-96* was yet another human rights organization to fall victim to this deplorable campaign yesterday," Amnesty International stated.

The ruling of the Belarusian Supreme Court was met by a peaceful sit-down protest by eight members of *Spring-96* who were arrested by police but later released. It is expected that they will be tried later today for staging an unsanctioned protest action and may face up to 15 days' imprisonment. If imprisoned, Amnesty International will consider them to be prisoners of conscience.

In recent months a disturbing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), directly and indirectly engaged in the promotion and defence of human rights in Belarus, have been closed by a judiciary whose independence has been repeatedly called into question by the international community.

"*Spring-96* was closed by the Belarusian Supreme Court on the slightest of pretexts and for the most spurious of reasons. The ulterior motive behind the rationale behind yesterday's ruling should be apparent to all," Amnesty International stated.

As in the case of several other human rights NGOs, the court ruled that *Spring-96* had violated several provisions of a highly controversial law which tightly regulates the activities of civil society. In one instance, the court reportedly ruled that in rendering legal assistance to individuals who were not members of the human rights organization, *Spring-96* had violated the law.

In early September another leading human rights organization, *Legal Assistance to the Population*, whose staff members have been active in determining the fate of Belarus "disappeared" opposition figures, was shut down on grounds equally as spurious.

In the month of August alone two NGO resource centres, *Civic Initiatives* and *Ratusha*, were liquidated by the Belarusian authorities, while the influential Belarusian Helsinki Committee received an official warning from the Ministry of Justice for omitting the quotation marks from the organization's name on its official letterheads and organizational symbol.

"It would be impossible to conceive of more trivial reasons to justify the suppression of

Belarus' human rights community than those used by the Belarusian authorities. In light of these repeated attacks any claims that Belarus is committed to human rights and the rule of law is farcical," Amnesty International stated.

The impending closure of these human rights organizations has drawn repeated criticism from a range of international bodies including the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Amnesty International is urging the Belarusian authorities to allow human rights defenders in the country to exercise their rights of association and peaceful assembly without fear of obstruction, harassment, intimidation or fear of reprisals.

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