

Belarus: Human rights defenders in the spotlight of the state

*Human rights defenders in Belarus are facing a relentless campaign of harassment and intimidation by the authorities, Amnesty International said in a new report released today, *In the Spotlight of the State: Human Rights Defenders in Belarus*.*

"Week-in-week-out human rights defenders struggle against a campaign of concerted pressure aimed at wearing them down. This campaign has assumed various forms, sometimes very crude, and has included their arbitrary detention, short-term imprisonment and ill-treatment."

"A significant number of the human rights defenders who have fallen foul of the Belarusian authorities have spoken out against possible 'disappearances' in Belarus, including that of Russian Public Television cameraman, Dmitry Zavadsky, in the year 2000," the organization noted.

The concerns and fears of these activists appear to be justified in the light of recent statements made by two former Belarusian officials -- who had been assigned to investigate the whereabouts of the missing men and are now speaking from the USA where they obtained political asylum -- that the "disappearances" were ordered by very senior appointees of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

The heavy-handedness of the authorities in dealing with its opponents appears to be confirmed by the two men's recent accounts that an elite police unit directly under the control of the country's leadership allegedly carried out the killing of key opposition figures, including former Minister of the Interior Yury Zakharenko, the Deputy

Speaker of the dissolved Belarusian parliament Viktor Gonchar, and his companion, Anatoly Krasovsky.

A leading voice in the campaign to discover the fate of the "disappeared", human rights lawyer Oleg Volchek, was beaten unconscious in the course of his work. The incident occurred in July 1999 after police officers detained him after he had given a speech about the possible "disappearances" during a pro-democracy demonstration in Minsk. No one was ever brought to justice in connection with his beating. Amnesty International believes that Oleg Volchek had been deliberately targeted by the authorities for his work investigating possible "disappearances" in the country.

As recently as May this year, around 30 protestors carrying placards of the missing men were detained in central Minsk. One man is alleged to have suffered a broken arm after police officers dispersed the peaceful gathering. Later in the day a further dozen human rights activists -- one of whom was reportedly seriously beaten -- were detained in a similar protest in the capital.

"The propensity of the authorities to use violence against human rights defenders has certainly not been reserved for those speaking out against possible 'disappearances', since numerous other human rights defenders have been targeted by the authorities," Amnesty International said.

Examples of this include:

Sixty-year-old veteran human rights activist, Valery Schukin, currently serving a three-month sentence for his human rights activities, and considered by Amnesty International to be a prisoner of

conscience. During his detention in Belarus' notorious Zhodino prison he had his long beard shaved off by prison guards using a blunt razor.

33 activists of the youth human rights movement Zubr arrested on 21 April during an anti-presidential demonstration in Minsk. Around half of them remained in detention for three days, and Amnesty International considered them to be prisoners of conscience. One young woman was reportedly punched unconscious by a police officer after being arrested.

Human rights defenders having their offices raided by the police or burgled under suspicious circumstances, with the loss of valuable equipment and data. Police investigations have reportedly been half-hearted and no one has been held to account.

Prominent human rights lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya being repeatedly threatened with criminal libel. In the past two years, she has faced repeated criminal charges for allegedly defaming a state official, risking up to five years' imprisonment.

Human rights lawyers being threatened with expulsion from their professional association, the Collegium of Advocates, which would prevent them from practising law.

"Deliberate obstructionism on the part of the authorities has also assumed more subtle, bureaucratic forms," Amnesty International stated. "Human rights organizations have been refused official registration, received official warnings threatening closure for the most spurious of reasons or have been prevented from staging human rights events."

"Belarus has a very poor overall human rights record," the organization said, highlighting continued allegations of ill-treatment of

detainees; the arbitrary detention of political opponents of the government; the continued use of the death penalty and the inhuman conditions inside the country's prisons and detention centres, where a number of "prisoners of conscience" are held.

"Instead of tackling these violations, the authorities turn against anyone who seek to act against them. Belarus should take immediate steps to reverse this situation and put an end to the campaign of harassment and intimidation against the country's human rights community".

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