

PUBLIC

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Arbitrary detention

BELARUS

Alyaksandr Bukhvostov (m)
Zmitser Dashkevich (m)
Sergei Kalyakin (m)
Alyaksandr Milinkevich (m)
Vintsuk Vyachorka (m)

Five leading members of the Belarusian opposition, named above, including the main opposition presidential candidate, have been detained for taking part in a peaceful march to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on 26 April. The detentions are part of the government's concerted effort to obstruct all opposition activity and political dissent in Belarus.

Amnesty International considers that they have been detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression, which are guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the Belarusian government has ratified.

Amnesty International regards the continuing harassment and detention of opposition figures, and those involved in civil society activity, as a deliberate attempt on the part of the authorities to intimidate and deter people from exercising these fundamental rights. The result is the continued stifling of open, public debate and activity within Belarus, to the concern of the international community. Both the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Belarus and the EU External Relations Commissioner has called for the immediate release of the five men.

The march took place in the centre of the capital, Minsk. Vintsuk Vyachorka, the leader of the Belarusian National Front, was detained immediately afterwards. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the main opposition presidential candidate, Sergei Kalyakin, Chair of the Party of Belarusian Communists, Alyaksandr Bukhvostov, leader of the Labour Party and Zmitser Dashkevich, leader of the Youth Front were all detained the following morning.

The five men are being held in Okrestina detention centre, in Minsk. A detainee who has recently been released after serving 10 days in the same detention centre for taking part in the demonstrations that followed the presidential elections reported that detainees are only fed twice a day, on cold tea and porridge made of barley or buckwheat. They are allowed to shower only every five days. There is a ventilation system, but the air only circulates from the corridor and most detainees smoke, making it difficult to breathe. There is no exercise yard or any chance to leave the cell for other activities.

All five men were tried and convicted on 27 April, under article 167 of the administrative code, for "organizing an unsanctioned meeting". The marchers had received permission to march to Bangalore Square where speeches were to take place. However, Alyaksandr Milinkevich reportedly addressed the crowd before the march began. Alyaksandr Milinkevich, Vintsuk Vyachorka and Alyaksandr Bukhvostov were sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment. Zmitser Dashkevich and Sergei Kalyakin were sentenced to 14 days. Following his sentence, Alyaksandr Milinkevich said, "This is a political action, a political sentence". Amnesty International considers all five men to be prisoners of conscience.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On 19 March, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was elected for a further five years, with a majority of over 82 per cent, according to official figures. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which

monitored the elections, declared them flawed and unreliable and has called for Belarus to respect the rights of the opposition. The opposition claims that the elections were rigged and immediately after the elections called on the population to demonstrate for a re-run of the elections. A tent city that was set up by demonstrators in the centre of Minsk was broken up by riot police on 25 March and up to 500 people were given administrative sentences of 10–15 days for their participation in the demonstrations.

The Chernobyl march, which takes place annually, has traditionally been a focus for opposition activists and in past years large numbers of demonstrators have been beaten and detained.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Belarusian, Russian or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to release the five men (naming them) immediately and unconditionally, as they have been detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression during the commemoration of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster;
- reminding the Belarusian authorities that Belarus has ratified the ICCPR, of which Article 19 guarantees the right to freedom of expression;
- calling on the Belarusian authorities to stop the harassment of opposition figures and civil society activists and to allow free and democratic debate and activity within Belarus.

APPEALS TO:

President

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Fax: +375 172 26 06 10
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e-mail: infogrp@president.gov.by
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Salutation: Dear President Lukashenka

Procurator General

Petr P. MIKLASHEVICH
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Salutation: Dear Procurator General

Minister of Internal Affairs

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Salutation: Dear Minister

and to diplomatic representatives of Belarus accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 11 May 2006.