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## Public Statement

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### Belarus: Compensation trial marred by intimidation

Amnesty International today expressed concern about the alleged intimidation of former prisoner of conscience and victim of police ill-treatment, Alyaksandr Shchurko, who has striven to obtain compensation through the Belarusian courts. Also, in the past 10 days the offices of two human rights organizations involved in his case have also been burgled, losing valuable equipment and documents.

"Yesterday's court hearing at Moskovsky Court in Minsk represented a monumental first step of one man and his determined lawyers to bring the police officers who physically ill-treated him to justice. No other victim of police ill-treatment has successfully taken a complaint so far," Amnesty International said today.

Forty-year-old Alyaksandr Shchurko, who was detained during last October's pro-democracy Freedom March in Minsk, was reportedly arrested and physically ill-treated along with 10 other people on a police bus during a two-hour journey to a detention centre by police officers from the special police unit, the OMON. He subsequently spent five days in prison. He is suing the Belarusian authorities for 100,000 dollars in compensation.

Alyaksandr Shchurko has alleged that as a result of his efforts to secure redress he has been subjected to threats, including anonymous

telephone calls instructing him to terminate his complaints. One of the police officers alleged to have ill-treated him reportedly threatened him earlier in the month saying that the street in Minsk where he lives is very narrow and he should be careful when he returns home at night. Alyaksandr Shchurko's 20-year-old son, who is studying economics at a state institute, has reportedly begun to score very low marks after previously being a very good student.

The two human rights organizations involved in Alyaksandr Shchurko's efforts to seek redress have also come under renewed pressure.

The offices of the Center for Human Rights, which is headed by Alyaksandr Shchurko's lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya, and the legal advice centre Legal Assistance to the Population have both been burgled in the last 10 days, losing valuable equipment and material.

"It appears more than coincidental that the offices of the human rights defenders involved in the case should be the target of disruptive actions at this time," Amnesty International said. "There appears to be a pattern of harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders in Belarus."

Amnesty International is urging the Belarusian authorities to ensure that Alyaksandr Shchurko and his lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya are protected from any form of intimidation, harassment or ill-treatment.

### **Background information**

Alyaksandr Shchurko was detained at around 5.30pm on 17 October 2000 on Yanka Kupala Street in Minsk by police officers, forced into a police car and taken to the Partizansky District Department of the

Interior. He was charged with taking part in an unauthorised demonstration and detained until approximately 3am on 18 October. He was then transferred with 10 other detainees to another detention centre in a police bus manned by police officers from the special police unit, the OMON.

He stated that upon entering the bus he suffered a blow to the head causing him to lose consciousness, only to be kicked, punched, sworn and spat at after he had regained consciousness. He also stated that the police officers also kicked and punched other detainees, hit them with truncheons and forced them to the floor. After being hit for a second time later in the journey, he reportedly again lost consciousness. The police officers are alleged to have verbally abused the detainees and threatened them with murder and rape.

Mother of three children Olga Baryalai, who had been detained earlier in the afternoon was also on the police bus and, like Alyaksandr Shchurko, witnessed the police ill-treatment the detainees were forced to endure. She was also hit and thrown to the floor of the police bus but, unlike the other detainees, she managed to escape being kicked. She was released after a detention centre chief official saw from her passport that she was a mother of three small children. Olga Baryalai alleged that on the way to the city on the police bus she was repeatedly verbally abused by the OMON police officers, who threatened to rape her and punish her and her family. Olga Baryalai, like Alyaksandr Shchurko, lodged a number of complaints highlighting her ill-treatment by the police officers but came under increasing pressure from the authorities to drop her complaints. In December 1999 she left Belarus and is currently claiming political asylum in a Western European country.

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