

AI Index: PRE 01/328/2011
30 June 2011

Belarus rounds up ‘silent’ protesters

Belarusian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release anyone being held merely for taking part in peaceful “silent” protests, Amnesty International said today after hundreds were arrested around the country yesterday.

In the capital Minsk and other cities, police arrested more than 250 people yesterday after several thousand gathered without speaking and clapped their hands to express disapproval at President Alexander Lukashenko’s economic policies. Most were later released, but some face short administrative sentences or fines on charges of “minor hooliganism.”

In recent weeks, police have made mass arrests at several such protests, which have been organized via social media networks.

“The Belarusian authorities must respect the freedom of assembly of those wishing to protest peacefully. Currently, applications to organize demonstrations are routinely denied, while those that do proceed are rapidly, and sometimes violently, dispersed,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“The Belarusian authorities must stop using violence and administrative sentences to punish demonstrators and discourage future protest.”

The Belarusian Minister of Justice told a meeting of factory workers on 28 June that, "If a citizen wants to just stand on a square or a street and is not disturbing public order then there is no crime being committed ... If it is a big group ... then you have to think about the freedom of others who are returning from work ... In that case police officers can ask people to stand or clap in another place."

In what appears to be an attempt to frustrate yesterday’s planned protest in Minsk, city authorities organized an open-air concert in the city’s main square at the same time.

News agencies have uploaded videos to YouTube showing plain-clothes police moving in on the protesters near the square and violently removing some of them into unmarked buses.

According to Viasna Human Rights Centre, more than 250 people were arrested throughout the country after yesterday’s protests, 160 of whom were in Minsk. Most have been released, but 30 have so far been charged with minor hooliganism, which entails short administrative sentences of 10 - 15 days or a fine.

There are also reports that police attacked journalists.

More than 460 people were detained after an earlier protest on 22 June. In Minsk, police detained 220 protesters, as well as several journalists, foreign nationals and a Swedish diplomat.

Most of the detainees were eventually released without charges. Some were reportedly beaten and a

number charged with “disorderly conduct”.

“Belarusian authorities must launch a prompt, independent investigation into allegations that protesters were beaten. It is unacceptable for police to use excessive force against peaceful demonstrators,” said John Dalhuisen