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Belarus: Demonstrators beaten during Freedom Day march

Amnesty International condemns the reportedly excessive use of force by Belarusian security forces against demonstrators who had gathered in the capital, Minsk, on 25 March 2008. Up to two thousand people had gathered in a square in the centre of the city to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the short-lived independence of Belarus in 1918, which is now referred to by the political opposition as Freedom Day. The authorities had not sanctioned the demonstration and President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government had vowed to prevent any public action to mark the occasion.

Police reportedly surrounded the demonstrators and after announcing that the gathering was illegal moved in to disband them. Eyewitness accounts, from both local non-governmental organizations as well as journalists report that the police beat protestors, using truncheons and kicking them before hauling them into waiting security trucks and buses. When some protestors tried to march towards the presidential offices, they were obstructed by police vehicles and many more were arrested.

Approximately 100 people were detained, and in the days following the demonstration, 75 administrative cases were brought against the demonstrators for "violating the order of organizing and holding mass events". As a result of the trials, 26 people have been sentenced to short-term prison sentences of five to 15 days, and over 50 people have been fined. According to eye-witness accounts and local human rights activists, as many as 20 people were injured as a result of the actions of the police. Political activists Andrei Babitski, Zmitser Dashkevich, Artur Finkevich and Mikita Shutsiankou all report being beaten. Reportedly one minor, Alena Makarevich, was severely beaten in the Partizanski police department.

The authorities have also taken unprecedented action against journalists who were covering the demonstration. Among those detained was a photo journalist from the independent newspaper *Nasha Niva*, Andrei Liankevich, who was reportedly beaten and charged with organizing and participating in an unsanctioned meeting. He was released on 27 March when his case was returned for further investigation. Two Lithuanian television reporters were reportedly beaten and their equipment was damaged by police. Following the demonstration, the authorities appear to be clamping down on independent media. On 27 March, the state security services (KGB) carried out nationwide searches in the homes of journalists who work with foreign media. Some have been detained as witnesses, allegedly in connection with a case under Article 367 of Belarus' Criminal Code, "Libel in relation to the President of Belarus".

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all those who have been detained and sentenced for the legitimate and peaceful expression of their views. The organization also calls on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that international human rights standards are fully observed during policing operations, and that demonstrators are not subjected to beating or other forms of ill-treatment.

Amnesty International is also urging the Belarusian authorities to respect their obligations under international law, including under Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. The organization urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately stop the obstruction, harassment and intimidation of civil society activists engaged directly or indirectly in the promotion and defence of human rights in Belarus.

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International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK

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