

Public Statement

28 September 2000

AI Index EUR 49/022/2000 - News Service Nr 185.

Belarus: Freedom March 2000 -- the authorities must avoid repeat of last year's Freedom March crack-down

There should be no repeat of last October's violent crack-down against Freedom March demonstrators during this Sunday's Freedom March 2000 pro-democracy protest in Minsk, Amnesty International said today in an appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement agencies.

"The large-scale arbitrary arrests and police ill-treatment of peaceful demonstrators during the Freedom March 1999 should be avoided at all costs, during which there were reportedly over 200 arrests".

In one incident 11 detainees were repeatedly kicked, punched, beaten with truncheons and forced to the floor of the police bus in which they were being transferred to a holding centre. One female detainee, a mother of three, alleged she was verbally abused and threatened with rape. Several of the detainees who subsequently brought official complaints against the police officers were reportedly later subjected to harassment and intimidation.

Thousands of Belarusians will take to the streets to peacefully protest the unpopular presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka and the continued violations of human rights in Minsk on Sunday during the Freedom March 2000 demonstration.

"The authorities should ensure that no one will be ill-treated or imprisoned by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly," Amnesty International said.

"Peaceful assembly is a fundamental human right and is enshrined in international law. Amnesty International will consider any demonstrators who are detained for their peaceful protests as prisoners of conscience".

Background

Throughout 1999 and 2000 Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the arbitrary detention of demonstrators who peacefully exercise their right to freedom of assembly. The organization also condemned frequent reported acts of ill-treatment of detainees by police officers.

During the most recent large-scale demonstration in March 2000 between 400 - 500 demonstrators were reportedly detained for several hours by the police. At least 30 journalists and covering the demonstration and a number of prominent human rights activists were also deliberately targeted by the authorities.

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Last updated : September 28