

EXTRA 35/99

Health co

BELARUS**Viktor GONCHAR, 42, opposition leader and chair of the unofficial central commission for the Belarussian presidential elections**

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the health of detained opposition leader Viktor Gonchar, who apparently suffered a heart attack in prison on 5 March 1999. The prison authorities have refused to hospitalize him and have prevented him from seeing his wife.

He is reportedly being forcibly fed by prison officials, having begun a hunger strike just after he was sentenced on 1 March, in protest at his imprisonment.

Viktor Gonchar and 15 other members of the opposition were reportedly detained on 25 February during a peaceful meeting in a café attended by a number of journalists. All 15 are members of an unofficial electoral commission set up in January by Viktor Gonchar and made up of former members of parliament - which was dissolved three years ago by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka (see background information). All were released pending trial but charged under the Administrative Code of Belarus with holding an unsanctioned meeting. On 1 March, however, Viktor Gonchar was arrested again and later that day sentenced by a Minsk court to 10 days' imprisonment under the same code for organizing an unsanctioned meeting.

Viktor Gonchar appears to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to reports, the members of the electoral commission refuse to recognise the referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament three years ago and want to hold presidential elections in May 1999. They allegedly accuse President Lukashenka, who secured a mandate in the referendum to stay in office until 2001, despite an election being scheduled for 1999, of running a dictatorship.

Political unrest, in the form of protests and demonstrations, has increased in recent months. Police have responded with violence, forcibly breaking up peaceful opposition demonstrations and arresting hundreds of peaceful protestors.

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern to the government about the pattern of ill-treatment, including imprisonment, of political dissidents as a result of their peaceful activities.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in Russian or your own language:

- expressing serious concern for the health of Viktor Gonchar and seeking assurances that he be given any necessary medical care;
- calling for his immediate and unconditional release as a prisoner of conscience, detained for his political beliefs and non-violent opposition activities;
- seeking assurances that no one in the future will be subjected to ill-treatment or imprisonment solely on the grounds of their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

APPEALS TO: (Please mark all appeals "URGENT - SROCHNO")

Due to an unreliable telephone system in Belarus, fax tones may be difficult to obtain. Please keep trying (it can help to dial slowly). Additionally, you may have the most success ringing during office hours as fax machines are sometimes turned off at the end of the working day (+2 hours GMT). If a voice answers, repeat "fax" until connected.

The President of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka
Respublika Belarus, 220010 g. Minsk, pl. Nezavisimosti
Apparat Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus
Prezidentu Respubliki Belarus Lukashenka A.H
Telegrams:Prezidentu Lukashenko, Minsk, Belarus
Faxes:+ 375 172 23 58 25 (office hours only)
Salutation:Dear President

The Procurator General of Belarus, Aleh Bozhelko
Respublika Belarus, 220050 g. Minsk, Ul. Internatsionalnaya, 22
Prokuratura Respubliki Belarus
Generalnomu prokuroru BOZHELKU A.
Telegrams:Generalnomu prokuroru, Minsk, Belarus
Faxes:+375 172 26 41 66
Salutation:Dear Procurator General

Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Yuriy Sivakow
Respublika Belarus, g. Minsk, Ul. Urytskaha, 5
Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del Respubliki Belarus, Ministru Sivakowu
Telegrams:Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del, Minsk, Belarus
Faxes:+ 375 172 26 12 47
Salutation:Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Ivan Antonovich
Respublika Belarus, 220030 g.Minsk, Ul. Lenina, 19
Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Respubliki Belarus Ministru Antonovich I.
Faxes:+ 375 172 27 45 21 / 23 99 18

and to diplomatic representatives of Belarus accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.