

AI INDEX: EUR 49/16/99
19 July 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Belarus: Police should not detain or ill-treat peaceful protestors during presidential demonstrations

Belarus' opposition groups should not be subjected to ill-treatment or detention during this week's peaceful protests to mark the official end of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's term in office on Tuesday 20 July, Amnesty International said today in an appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement authorities.

Amnesty International is concerned about a remark President Lukashenka made in a conversation with senior officials from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe on 15 July in which he reportedly said, "You know, I am generally a quiet but resolute person and, if somebody begins to provoke us, we will take the toughest adequate measures within the limits of law." He is also reported to have said, "[The] authorities have had more than enough events recently; this is why we will not tolerate any scuffles in the country."

Amnesty International has raised its concerns with the Belarusian authorities regarding the ill-treatment of peaceful demonstrators on numerous occasions, but it is not aware of any steps taken by the government to address the problem.

The Belarusian authorities have employed a number of draconian laws to silence the peaceful opposition. Under the Criminal Procedural Code of Belarus, protestors can be placed under administrative arrest for up to 10 days without formal charge.

The human rights organization urges the authorities to 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 will consider any demonstrators who are detained for their peaceful protests as prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International is also calling on the authorities to inform all law enforcement officials, assigned to ensure law and order during the protests, that torture and ill-treatment are prohibited in any circumstances under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Belarus is a state party.

Background

In 1996 President Lukashenka held a referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament. In a further referendum in 1996 he secured a mandate to stay in office until 2001, despite an election scheduled for 1999. Opposition groups argue that the referendum violated the constitution and therefore he should step down and fresh elections should be held.

In May opposition groups in Belarus organized unofficial presidential elections in protest against President Lukashenka's refusal to hold elections. During the unofficial presidential elections in May 1999, Amnesty International repeatedly expressed concern about the pattern of ill-treatment and imprisonment of members of the opposition under these administrative measures.

Opponents of the President have also been sentenced to longer prison terms under the Criminal Code of Belarus for their opposition activities.

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