

AI INDEX: EUR 49/33/99
30 November 1999

Belarus: Amnesty International welcomes release of former Prime Minister

Today's release of prisoner of conscience and former Prime Minister of Belarus, Mikhail Chigir, was welcomed by Amnesty International, but the organization expressed concern that the release is conditional and that he may still face trial.

Mikhail Chigir was arrested on 30 March 1999 and charged with financial impropriety relating to a position he held as head of a bank before he became Prime Minister in July 1994. He has always denied the charge and has maintained he acted within the law. At the end of September 1999 the main charge relating to large-scale embezzlement was dropped by the authorities.

Amnesty International believes that Mikhail Chigir was targeted by the Belarusian authorities after he announced he would stand as a presidential candidate in the unofficial presidential elections scheduled for May 1999.

The former Prime Minister must remain in Belarus while the prosecutor's office decides within 24 days whether to send Mikhail Chigir's case to trial or reinvestigate.

"President Lukashenka has been systematically silencing peaceful opposition to his rule by imprisoning prominent figures. If Mikhail Chigir is rearrested by the Belarusian authorities at any time during the trial or investigation, Amnesty International will invoke his status as a prisoner of conscience," Amnesty International said.

The organization is calling on President Lukashenka to unconditionally release all other prisoners of conscience currently being held for their non-violent political beliefs, including Andrey Klimov and Vladimir Koudinov, who were arrested and imprisoned after opposing the President's forced dissolution of parliament in 1996.

Background information

In 1996 President Lukashenka held a referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament. In a further referendum in November 1996 he secured a mandate to stay in office until 2001, despite an election being scheduled for 1999. Opposition groups and a significant part of the international community have argued that the referendum violated the constitution and therefore President Lukashenka's presidency expired in July 1999.

Opposition groups have staged a number of peaceful protests against President Lukashenka, questioning the legitimacy of his tenure in office. In May the opposition organized unofficial presidential elections, in which around four million people reportedly participated, in protest against President Lukashenka's refusal to hold fresh elections.

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the treatment of members of the opposition.

ENDS.../

**For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London,
UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>**