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## **Belarus urged to free prisoners of conscience held after post-election protest**

Amnesty International today called for the unconditional release of 15 Belarusian activists and journalists charged with ‘organizing mass disorder’ following a post-election demonstration in December, and declared them prisoners of conscience.

Twenty-four opposition activists and journalists, including six presidential candidates, have been detained and charged for their participation in a 19 December demonstration in Minsk following the presidential elections. They are expected to face trial in two to three months.

The detainees are currently being denied adequate access to lawyers and doctors despite some having been severely injured by riot police on the day of the demonstration.

“Fifteen of these detainees are prisoners of conscience, facing trumped up charges purely because of the peaceful expression of their political opinions. They should be immediately and unconditionally released, and all charges against them should be dropped” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“This prosecution and ill-treatment of people who were demonstrating peacefully shows a blatant disregard for human rights by the Belarusian authorities and merits the strongest condemnation from the international community.”

Although the prisoners of conscience are facing charges of ‘organizing mass disorder’ accompanied by violent attacks and armed resistance that could carry prison sentences of up to 15 years, Amnesty International has found no evidence they either resorted to or incited violence before or during the demonstrations.

Protesters were mostly peaceful during the Minsk demonstration, but for a small number of masked young men who attacked the parliament buildings.

One eyewitness reported that one of the detainees, presidential candidate Mykalau Statkevich, who was speaking at the time, called on the crowd to stop attacking the parliament building doors. Video footage shows presidential candidate Vital Rymasheusky attempting to stop the men from causing damage to the building.

Riot police then violently dispersed the demonstration.

Another detained presidential candidate Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu had received head injuries when he was beaten by riot police as he was making his way towards the demonstration. He was later dragged into detention by men in plain clothes from the intensive care ward of the hospital where he was being treated. On 29 December he was unable to speak to his lawyer and appeared to be seriously ill, but he has

not been transferred to hospital.

Detained presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau was also seriously injured during the attack on the demonstrators on 19 December, and may have a broken leg. Andrei Sannikau's lawyer saw him in court on 29 December but was unable to speak to him.

Lawyers have been frequently denied access to the detainees with the explanation that the two meeting rooms in the KGB detention centre are in use.

Over 700 people were detained for their participation in the demonstration. Most have since been released after serving short administrative sentences, but key political figures, activists and journalists are still detained in what appears to be a clampdown on opposition activity. As well as the 24 now charged, a further 14 people are still being detained and may soon be charged.

The 15 prisoners of conscience are:

- Alyaksei Mihalevich, Mykalau Statkevich, Uladzimir Nyaklyayeu, and Andrei Sannikau who stood as presidential candidates in the elections.
- Prominent journalists Natallya Radzina, the editor of Charter 97 website, Iryna Khalip correspondent for the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, and Syargei Vaznyak, Editor of the newspaper "Comrade".
- Alyaksandr Fyaduta, a political commentator, Pavel Sevyarynets an opposition activist and member of Vital Rymasheusky's campaign team, Anatol Lyabedka a member of the United Civic Party, Uladzimir Kobets, a member of Alyaksandr Sannikov's campaign team, Zmitser Bandarenka, the coordinator of the opposition European Belarus campaign, Alyaksandr Arastovych, and Syargei Martseleu members of Mykalau Statkevich's campaign team, and Anastasiya Palazhanka, the deputy leader of the Young Front movement.

Vital Rymasheusky, who stood as a presidential candidate, was released on bail on 1 January, as were Anatol Paulau, and Aleg Korban, but the charges against them remain in force.

Amnesty International is also looking into the cases of the other people who have been charged with the same offence in connection with the demonstration on 19 December, and there may be further prisoners of conscience among them.