

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: EUR 49/006/2009
19 June 2009

Belarus must meet Council of Europe human rights standards

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (the Assembly) is set to vote on the restoration of the Special Guest Status of the Belarusian Parliament on 23 June.

Whatever the outcome of this vote, Amnesty International calls on the Assembly to continue urging Belarus to immediately declare an official moratorium on death sentences and executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty. Furthermore, the Assembly should join in calling for the immediate and unconditional release of 11 people who Amnesty International considers are prisoners of conscience.

Death Penalty

Four people were executed in Belarus in 2008. Despite the gradual decrease in the number of executions and the fact that no further executions have taken place since February 2008, the government has yet to introduce an official moratorium on executions.

Amnesty International calls on the Belarusian authorities to immediately declare an official moratorium on all executions and death sentences with a view to abolishing the death penalty, in line with UN General Assembly Resolutions 62/149 and 63/168 adopted in 2007 and 2008, and to commute without delay the sentences of all prisoners currently on death row to terms of imprisonment.

Prisoners of Conscience

Following their participation in an unauthorised demonstration on 10 January 2008, 11 young people were sentenced under Article 342 of the Criminal Code for "taking part in or organizing actions that gravely disturb public order" and sentenced to between one and a half and two years of restricted freedom. Artsyom Dubski, Mikhail Pashkevich, Tatyana Tishkevich, Pavel Vinahgradau, Alyaksei Bondar, Mikhal Kryvau, Ales Straltsou, and Ales Charnyshou were sentenced in April 2008; Mikhail Subach and Maxim Dashuk were sentenced in May 2008, and Alyaksandr Borozenko was sentenced in December 2008. The conditions of restricted freedom are so restrictive that Amnesty International considers it to be a form of imprisonment.

Those sentenced to restricted freedom are required to be constantly at home when not at work, to submit to alcohol and drug tests as required and to report regularly to Ministry of Interior officials. They are forbidden to travel anywhere other than for work, study, and the time required for travel is specified and cannot be exceeded. They are also forbidden to visit sport facilities, attend sport or other performances, commercial premises where alcohol is sold or other people's houses. Any lapse from the conditions incurs a warning and after three warnings they will face prosecution for failure to comply with the conditions. The police officer in charge of the case can change the conditions arbitrarily making it very difficult for those convicted to comply.

Amnesty International considers these 11 young people to be prisoners of conscience, sentenced for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of assembly and expression and calls for their unconditional and immediate release.

The organization calls on the Belarusian Parliament and the authorities to address these concerns as a clear demonstration of their willingness to adhere to Council of Europe human rights standards.

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