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Belarus: Opposition cannot be stifled

JOINT PRESS RELEASE Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

The Belarusian authorities have once again violated the right to peaceful protest for political opponents and human rights activists, Amnesty International and FIDH said today amid reports of arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment of demonstrators. For the past two days hundreds of people have been protesting in the centre of Minsk against the results of parliamentary elections and a controversial referendum that lifted restrictions on President Lukashenka's term of office.

"This latest demonstration of force by the Belarusian authorities shows the heavy price that must be paid for opposing President Lukashenka in Belarus today," Amnesty International and FIDH said.

Riot police used batons to disperse hundreds of peaceful demonstrators who were marching on the presidential palace waving banners bearing slogans such as "No to tyranny". About 50 demonstrators were herded onto buses. Among those detained and beaten were young activists and leading members of the opposition. Journalists from Russian TV channels Ren TV and NTV were reportedly also beaten up and a journalist from AFP was detained.

Some underage activists were released overnight. Forty people are currently standing trial in Leninsky district court in Minsk. They are being charged with participation in or organization of unsanctioned public demonstrations under the Code on Administrative Infringements and face up to 15 days' in prison or a fine.

Among the detained demonstrators are Pavel Severinets of Maladi Front (Youth Front) and Anatoly Lebedko leader of the United Civil Party. Anatoly Lebedko received serious injuries and he is now in hospital with concussion, broken ribs and possible kidney damage. So far Mykola Statkevich of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party has been sentenced to 10 days' administrative arrest. Artur Finkevich, another member of Maladi Front has received 15 days administrative arrest and members of the youth opposition movement ZUBR have received from 5 to 10 days administrative arrest. Other demonstrators have been fined.

"This is a clear violation of the right to freedom of expression and assembly, these people are being held for the peaceful expression of their views. Amnesty International and FIDH consider all those detained to be prisoners of conscience and asks the Belarusian authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally," the two organizations said.

As demonstrations are likely to continue, Amnesty International and FIDH call on the Belarusian authorities to respect the right to freedom of expression and assembly, as well as international standards in their treatment of demonstrators.

Background

The protests came after the Belarusian authorities announced that in the referendum held on 17 October more than 77 per cent of eligible voters had supported president Lukashenka, who has held power since 1994, to run for a third consecutive term. Independent observers including those of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have said that the elections and the referendum fell far short of democratic standards.

Belarus has come under consistent criticism from inter-governmental organizations for its blatant violation of international standards. In April 2004, the UN Commission on Human Rights criticized Belarus for continued reports of arbitrary arrest and detention, and for harassment of non-governmental organizations, opposition political parties and those engaged in democratic activities. It has called on Belarus to bring the actions of its police and security forces into conformity with its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In May 2004, the Council of Europe rejected an application from Belarus to renew its special status with the organization which had been suspended when President Lukashenka dissolved the parliament in 1997.

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