

EXTERNAL

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UA 266/96 Ill-treatment / Possible prisoners of conscience 18 November 1996

BELARUS Peaceful demonstrators reportedly beaten, 10 detained

On 17 November 1996, Belarussian police, wielding riot shields, reportedly beat demonstrators with truncheons and arrested more than 10 people during a peaceful demonstration against the President called the "March of Silence" in the centre of the capital Minsk. As political unrest in Belarus grows, Amnesty International fears that this latest use of force by police against peaceful protestors may be repeated.

Some 20 people were reportedly injured by the police on 17 November. Stanislav Bogdankevich, leader of the United Civic Party and a member of the parliamentary opposition, reportedly told a press conference that the police beat him with truncheons.

The march, reportedly attended by between 5,000 and 10,000 people, was the latest in a series of peaceful demonstrations against the proposals of the President to extend his term in office by two years without new elections and to create closer ties with Russia. Some demonstrators reportedly wore cloth gags to symbolize the way the national media has covered previous protest demonstrations of this kind. The President reportedly threatened this week to expel two Russian television journalists from Belarus. He had earlier in the year sacked newspaper editors and closed radio stations. Local radio allegedly made no mention of the march on 17 November, but continued with broadcasts urging people to vote.

The demonstration took place a week before a referendum on the Presidential proposal for a new Constitution. The referendum officially takes place on 24 November, but polling stations are already open. President Alyaksandr Lukashenka reportedly sent all voters a colour postcard of himself on 16 November and urged them to vote. His supporters reportedly said that people should vote before 24 November, when questions drafted by parliament will also be on the ballot paper, apparently contradicting the President's proposals.

Some parliamentary deputies have been reportedly staying in the parliament building around the clock because they fear the President will close the building, which has been picketed by opposition demonstrators.

Amnesty International is not aware of any steps taken by the government or the President of Belarus to stop the pattern of ill-treatment of demonstrators by the law enforcement officials.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed its concern to the Government of Belarus about the apparent pattern of ill-treatment and imprisonment of members of the opposition during peaceful strikes and demonstrations in Belarus.

For example, earlier this year regular police and special police forces reportedly used tear-gas against participants in a rally on 26 April in Minsk, the capital, and beat and otherwise ill-treated a number of them. The rally had been organized to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear power station disaster, but participants also denounced President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policy of closer ties with Russia and a crackdown on trade unions and the opposition press. In all, 204 persons were arrested during the rally

and most were kept in detention for between five and 15 days on charges of hooliganism. Most of the demonstrators were later released.

On 30 May police again clashed with nearly 3,000 demonstrators who picketed the presidential administration building in Minsk. According to witnesses, police beat protesters whose demands included the dropping of legal proceedings against opposition leaders Yury Khadyka and Vyacheslav Sivchyk. Reports stated that up to 84 protesters were detained for periods of up to 15 days. About 50 of the demonstrators were hospitalized for injuries allegedly inflicted by the police during the clash.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Russian, Belarussian or your own language:

- calling for the immediate release of any demonstrators held in police custody solely for exercising their right to freedom of peaceful assembly;
- seeking assurances that no one in the future will be subjected to ill-treatment or imprisonment by the police solely on the grounds of their political beliefs and for peacefully expressing their right to freedom of assembly;
- urging the authorities to initiate prompt and impartial investigations into all allegations of ill-treatment of demonstrators by the police and to bring anyone found responsible to justice;
- urging the authorities to provide compensation to the victims of police abuse and to inform all law enforcement officials that torture and ill-treatment are prohibited in any circumstances under the provisions of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Belarus is a party as a successor state of the USSR.

APPEALS TO:

The President of Belarus, Alyaksandr Lukashenka

Respublika Belarus

220010 g. Minsk

pl. Nezavisimosti

Apparat Prezidenta Respubliki Belarus

Prezidentu Respubliki Belarus LUKASHENKO A.H

Telegrams: Prezidentu Lukashenko, Minsk, Belarus

Faxes: + 375 172 23-58-25

Salutation: Dear President

The Acting Procurator General of Belarus, Vasiliy Stepanovich KAPITAN

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Salutation: Dear Acting Procurator General

Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Yuryy Zakharenka

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Salutation: Dear Minister

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The Chairman of the Supreme Court of Belarus, Vladimir S. Karavay

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The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Ulazimir SYANKO

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and to diplomatic representatives of Belarus accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 31 December 1996.