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# international

**PUBLIC**

**AI Index:**

**EUR 49/06/99**

**Date:**

**15 April 1999**

## **BELARUS: PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE MIKHAIL CHIGIR**

Amnesty International is concerned about the arrest of the opposition leader Mikhail Chigir, who is currently awaiting trial in prison. He appears to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience.

Mikhail Chigir was arrested on 30 March 1999 and charged with financial impropriety relating to a position he held as head of a bank, "Belagroprombank". The charge relates to the embezzlement of funds allocated for the construction of an office building in March 1994. Mikhail Chigir left the bank when he was appointed Prime Minister by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in July 1994. He has denied the charge and claims that the losses were made as a result of a change in the bank's fortunes after he left the company.

Amnesty International believes Mikhail Chigir was imprisoned for his active role in Belarus' opposition and for his intention to stand as a presidential candidate in unofficial presidential elections. Opposition groups in Belarus are organising unofficial presidential elections for 16 May 1999 in protest against the policies of President Lukashenka. In 1996 President Lukashenka staged a referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament. In a further referendum in 1996 he secured a mandate to stay in office until 2001, despite an election being scheduled for 1999. Opposition groups argue that President Lukashenka's presidency expires in July 1999 and therefore elections should be held in May 1999. Mikhail Chigir intended to stand as a candidate in these elections.

### **Background Information**

The case of Mikhail Chigir is not an isolated one. Amnesty International recently expressed serious concern about the detained opposition leader Viktor Gonchar. Viktor Gonchar is a founding member of the unofficial electoral commission, which was set up to organize the unofficial presidential elections. The electoral commission is made up of former members of the parliament which was dissolved three years ago by President Lukashenka. Viktor Gonchar was sentenced by a Minsk court to 10 days' imprisonment for organizing an unsanctioned meeting in a cafe with other members of the electoral commission.

Amnesty International believes that Viktor Gonchar like Mikhail Chigir appears to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities. Amnesty International considered him a prisoner of conscience.

Amnesty International is concerned about the pattern of ill-treatment and imprisonment of members of the opposition. Political unrest, in the form of protests and demonstrations, has increased in recent months. Police have responded with violence, forcibly breaking up peaceful opposition demonstrations and arresting hundreds of peaceful protestors.

Amnesty International has repeatedly raised its concerns with the Belarusian authorities. However, it is not aware of any steps taken by the government or the President of Belarus to stop the pattern of ill-treatment and imprisonment.

**Amnesty International's recommendations:**

- ▮ Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Mikhail Chigir as a prisoner of conscience, detained for his political beliefs and non-violent opposition activities;
- ▮ Amnesty International is seeking assurances that no one in the future will be subjected to ill-treatment or imprisonment solely on the grounds of their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly, especially before and during the upcoming unofficial elections in May.