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## **Belarus: Police should not detain or ill-treat peaceful protesters during unofficial presidential elections**

No incidents of ill-treatment or detention of peaceful demonstrators should mar the unofficial presidential elections on 16 May 1999, Amnesty International said today in a preventive appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement authorities.

Opposition groups in Belarus are organizing unofficial presidential elections in protest against the policies of President Lukashenka. In 1996 President Lukashenka held 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.

"The pattern of ill-treatment and imprisonment of the opposition in Belarus is alarming," Amnesty International said. In recent months, police have responded with violence to growing political unrest, forcibly breaking up peaceful opposition demonstrations and arresting hundreds of peaceful protesters.

"Ill-treatment by law enforcement officials is totally unacceptable," the human rights organization said. Amnesty International has repeatedly raised its concerns with the Belarusian authorities regarding the ill-treatment of peaceful demonstrators, but it is not aware of any steps taken by the government to address the problem.

"The authorities should ensure that no one will be ill-treated or imprisoned by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly," Amnesty International urged. Should any peaceful demonstrators be detained by the police, the organization will consider them prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International is also calling on the authorities to inform all law enforcement officials, assigned to ensure law and order during the protests, that torture and ill-treatment are prohibited in any circumstances under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Belarus is a party.

### **Background**

In recent months, Amnesty International has expressed concern about the detention of prominent members of the opposition in Belarus. At the beginning of March 1999, Viktor Gonchar was sentenced by a Minsk court to 10 days' imprisonment for organizing an unsanctioned meeting in a café with other members of the electoral commission. The electoral commission was set up to organize the unofficial presidential elections due to take place later this month.

At the end of March the former prime minister, Mikhail Chigir, was imprisoned for his active role in Belarus' opposition and for his intention to stand as a presidential candidate in the unofficial presidential elections.

Mikhail Chigir and Viktor Gonchar appeared to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of their political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities. Amnesty International considers Mikhail Chigir a prisoner of conscience.

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