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Belarus: Amnesty International adopts Russian TV Journalists as prisoners of conscience

Amnesty International called today for the immediate and unconditional release of Russian TV journalists Pavel Sheremet, Dmitry Zavadsky and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov, detained in Belarus for their professional non-violent activities as media workers and therefore considered by the organization as prisoners of conscience.

"The circumstances of their detention -- together with previous persecution and attempts by the authorities to prevent Pavel Sheremet from reporting on issues relating to Belarus -- suggest that the three men have been targeted solely because of their journalistic activities," Amnesty International said.

Pavel Sheremet, Minsk bureau chief of ORT, Russia's public television station, Dmitry Zavadsky, the cameraman, and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov, the crew's driver were detained in Belarus on 26 July. They are currently in a temporary detention centre in the town of Grodno, and their case has apparently been transferred tofor investigation to the Belarussian Committee for State Security (KGB).

During a press conference with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 1996, Pavel Sheremet reportedly asked him, "So, who is going to be [arrested] next?" The President allegedly replied: "It could be you."

According to the latest news, two of the three crew members have been officially charged today with Article 80 of the Belarussian Criminal Code, under which illegal border-crossing is punishable by imprisonment of up to five years. The crew's driver, Yaroslav Ovchinnikov, has not yet been charged.

Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, was quoted by the local media today as threatening to revise the union charter with Belarus over the detention of the Russian television crew. President Yeltsin was said to be "surprised and indignant".

Background

The three men were detained following an unofficial visit to the Belarussian border with Lithuania on 22 July, to check the security situation -- although they had previously been denied permission to do so from the Belarussian border guards.

During the trip, the crew filmed an unguarded section of the border before proceeding to a border check point, allegedly to interview the guards for the television program. They were detained there by the border guards, who seized two video cassettes and filed a report about the incident. The crew were then released. Footage of the film retained by the crew was shown on ORT the same day.

On 26 July, Pavel Sheremet and Yaroslav Ovchinnikov were detained by border guards at Minsk airport as they returned from a trip to Bulgaria. They were taken to Grodno, a Belarussian town and regional administrative centre near the Lithuanian border, allegedly in connection with the 22 July incident. Dmitry Zavadsky was arrested at his home in Minsk on the same day.

On 27 July, KGB officials arrived at the home of Pavel Sheremet with a search warrant signed by the head of the Regional Department of KGB for Grodno Region, Vladimir Tupik. They had not obtained, however, an official order by the procurator as they explained this had not been possible because it was Sunday. On the same day, law enforcement officials reportedly arrived at the ORT offices in Minsk in search of the video cassettes of the border film, despite the fact that staff explained their only copy of the footage was already in Moscow. The officials allegedly seized Pavel Sheremet's accreditation card, passport and draft articles.

Earlier in the month, the Belarussian authorities had accused Pavel Sheremet of biased reporting, and the Belarussian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stripped him of his media accreditation. A second journalist, Aleksandr Stupnikov, a reporter for Russia's NTV television station, had been similarly accused and expelled from Belarus in March.
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