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Amnesty International denied access to Belarus

On 10 October, the Belarusian authorities denied a visa to Amnesty International's researcher on Belarus, Heather McGill. The refusal to grant access to Amnesty International now when representatives of the organization have been visiting the country unhindered for over 20 years to carry out human rights work highlights the current deterioration in human rights in Belarus.

Amnesty International has taken steps to clarify the reasons for the refusal to grant a visa to Amnesty International's researcher. On 22 October, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Salil Shetty, wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, requesting clarification for the refusal to grant a visa. Several letters have been sent to the Embassy of the Republic of Belarus in the United Kingdom, but no response has been forthcoming. The organization therefore concludes that the refusal to grant a visa to Heather McGill is the result of a political decision not to cooperate with Amnesty International, and to deny its representatives entry to the country.

This decision comes at a time of deteriorating human rights situation in the country. Amnesty International has been documenting the harassment and ill-treatment of prisoners of conscience who are being pressured into signing confessions. Six people remained in prison in connection with their participation in the demonstration on 19 December 2010, four of whom - Mykalau Statkevich, Pavel Sevyarynets, Zmitser Dashkevich and Eduard Lobau - were recognized as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International.

Zmitser Dashkevich, who was sentenced in connection with a demonstration in December 2010, received a further year in prison on 28 August 2012 for allegedly violating prison rules and on 30 October the court sitting in penal colony in Mazyr made a decision to transfer Zmitser Dashkevich to a prison with harsher conditions of detention to serve the remaining of his sentence. The court considered the fact that Zmitser Dashkevich was named a 'malignant violator' of the rules of the penal colony in Mazyr, where he only arrived in September 2012.

Non-governmental organizations are under increasing pressure and face prosecution and liquidation under laws that violate the right to freedom of association. On 9 October prison monitoring non-governmental organization Platforma was liquidated by the decision of the Minsk Economic court for failing to present a declaration of income on time and to inform the tax authorities of a change of address. Andrei Bondarenko, the chair of the organization insists that he presented the income declaration on time and the organization has not changed its legal address. Ales Bialiatski, chairperson of Human Rights Centre Viasna, and Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights remained in prison for tax evasion. He was sentenced to four and a half years on 24 November 2011 after a trial that did not satisfy international standards for fair trials. The sentence relates to the use of personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to support the work of Human Rights Centre Viasna in Belarus. The Minsk City Court turned down Ales Bialiatski's appeal on 24 January 2012, and in September the sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court.

It is ironic that Amnesty International's researcher was denied access to Belarus on 10 October which is the World Day against the death penalty. Belarus is the last country in Europe, which still carries out executions. Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau were executed in March this year in connection with a series of bomb attacks in Belarus, most recently in a metro station in Minsk on 11 April 2011. Amnesty International had serious concerns over the

fairness of the trial. In the case of Uladzslau Kavalyou, as in the cases of Vasily Yuzepchuk and Andrei Zhuk, who were executed in March 2010, and Andrei Burdyko who was executed in July 2011, the Belarusian authorities ignored a request made to the government by the UN Human Rights Committee not to execute Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau until it had considered their cases.

Amnesty International always aims to work constructively with governments, and it will continue to seek opportunities to present its concerns and engage with representatives of the Belarusian government. The organization hopes that the Belarusian government will reconsider its decision not to grant access to Amnesty International.