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## **Belarus: March of Freedom clash should not be used as excuse for government crack-down**

"Yesterday's violent confrontation should not be used as an excuse by the authorities to round up peaceful members of Belarus' opposition", Amnesty International said today.

The human rights organization has learned that at least 200 demonstrators were arrested by the police following Sunday's demonstration in which around twenty thousand people are reported to have taken part. Although many of the demonstrators were released shortly after their arrests, a significant number are reported to be still held in detention.

Amnesty International is concerned that the arrests may continue today and has learned that prominent members of opposition have gone into hiding.

A police spokesperson reportedly stated today that 40 demonstrators are still in detention and are expected to be charged in the next few days. Opposition groups maintain that this figure could be higher.

"Any demonstrators arrested for peacefully protesting against President Lukashenka should be released immediately and unconditionally," the organization said today.

Amnesty International does not condone the use of the violence, but considers any demonstrators detained for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly as prisoners of conscience.

In a pre-emptive public statement on 14 October 1999 (*see AI Index Number 49/26/99*) Amnesty International called 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 state party.

"No one who is currently being held in detention should be ill-treated by police officers. Demonstrators suspected of violent behaviour should be tried in the course of fair proceedings and must not be subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment," the organization stated today.

Amnesty International urges the authorities to carry out immediately an impartial investigation on any allegations of ill-treatment of people by police officers, either during yesterday's march or while in detention, and to ensure that any police officers responsible for the excessive use of force or ill-treatment be brought to justice".

### **Background**

The opposition organized Sunday's March of Freedom demonstration as a protest against

President Lukashenka's increasingly unpopular rule. Despite the reports of violence later in the day, the official demonstration is reported to have passed by peacefully and without incident. After the demonstrators arrived at their final destination at Bangalor Square a smaller group of protestors attempted to march into the centre of the city, clashing with police officers who blocked their path. It is reported that demonstrators retaliated by throwing stones at the police after police officers attacked them with batons and riot shields.

In recent months Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the human rights situation in Belarus. The organization has received numerous reports of demonstrators being arrested for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

During such protests members of the peaceful opposition have been ill-treated by police officers. Amnesty International believes that the Belarusian authorities have also deliberately targeted prominent members of the opposition in an attempt to intimidate and silence them for speaking out against the government. The organization is concerned that yesterday's confrontation may be used as an excuse to continue the repression of the peaceful opposition.

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