

AI Index: PRE01/334/2011
04 July 2011

Tear gas fired and websites blocked as Belarus protesters are targeted

Belarusian authorities must refrain from using excessive force against protesters, Amnesty International said today, after police used teargas and arrested more than 300 protesters on Sunday.

Social networking websites Facebook and Twitter were also reportedly blocked as thousands of activists gathered in the capital Minsk and other cities to express their disapproval at President Alexander Lukashenka's economic policies by clapping in unison.

Tear gas was used against a group of protesters at Minsk's Railway Station Square, and protesters elsewhere in the city were beaten by police. The arrests were carried out by state security agents in plain clothes who did not present any form of identification or state the reasons for the arrests.

"Belarus continues to ride roughshod over human rights, but these latest mass arrests and use of teargas against peaceful protesters show that attacks on freedom of expression appear to be intensifying," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"These blocks on communication are an attempt to cut off demonstrators from each other and clearly violates the right to freedom of expression," said John Dalhuisen.

President Lukashenka was in defiant mood at a military parade in Minsk to mark Independence Day on Sunday, the anniversary of the liberation of Belarus from German occupation in 1944. He blamed the unrest on foreign intervention.

"We understand the goal of these attacks. It is to sow uncertainty and disturbance, destroy public consent, and [...] nullify efforts done to gain independence. This will never happen," he said.

According to Viasna Human Rights Centre, among the more than 200 protesters arrested in Minsk were 17 journalists. Some of the journalists have been released, but 340 people remain in detention. Some 160 are being held in Minsk, while 180 are in detention centres in cities across Belarus. Some protesters were beaten as they were arrested and others were beaten in the police vans.

Trials are ongoing, and the detainees are being charged with minor hooliganism or participation in an unsanctioned meeting, offences which involve short administrative sentences of 10-15 days.

"Clamping down on peaceful protesters does nothing to address the root causes of their grievances which relate primarily to the economic situation," said John Dalhuisen.

"Concerns about the enjoyment of economic and social rights cannot be removed by restricting civil and political rights. Peaceful protesters must not be detained, security forces must not use violence against protesters, and all those in detention must be immediately released", he added.