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## **Belarus must free activist held on tax evasion charges**

The Belarusian authorities must release a prominent human rights activist, whose pre-trial detention on charges of "serious tax evasion" is believed to be politically motivated.

Ales Bialatski, head of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, was arrested in central Minsk on 4 August over the use of his personal bank account in Lithuania to support his organization's human rights work in Belarus.

Viasna was derecognized by the Belarusian authorities in 2003 and as such was barred from opening a bank account in its name in Belarus.

In 2005 it became a criminal offence in Belarus to act in the name of an unregistered organization, punishable by six months to one year in prison.

Bialatski, who is also Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights, is reported to have been arrested as a result of bank information given to the Belarusian authorities by the Lithuanian Ministry of Justice.

"Belarus has the right to punish tax evasion as a crime. But the charges against Ales Bialatski are politically motivated. He is a prisoner of conscience, detained for carrying out his human right work and he should be released immediately," said Heather McGill, Belarus researcher for Amnesty International.

"By refusing to register legitimate NGOs and thus preventing them from functioning openly, the government of Belarus leaves activists such as Ales Bialatski with no choice but to use bank accounts in neighbouring countries to fund their work.

"Ales Bialatski's detention is part of a pattern of the ongoing and longstanding harassment of civil society activists and human rights defenders which has worsened with the crackdown on civil society following the Presidential elections in December 2010."

Bialatski was detained near Victory Square in Minsk on 4 August by employees of the Department of Financial Investigations in plain clothes. Documents and equipment were taken from the Viasna office. His city apartment and summer home outside Minsk were also searched.

He is currently held in pre-trial detention in Minsk.

The last six months have seen an unprecedented deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus. Key opposition figures have been detained, ill-treated and convicted in unfair trials. Critical NGOs, civil society activists and journalists face continuing harassment.

Viasna has been active in Belarus since 1998 and registered as an NGO in 1999. In 2003 its official status was withdrawn following its work on election monitoring and the authorities have repeatedly obstructed

the organization's official registration.

Following the Presidential elections in December 2010, the organization and its staff have come under increasing pressure from the authorities.