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Belarus activist facing jail over “politically motivated” tax charges

The Belarusian authorities must immediately release a prominent human rights activist and prisoner of conscience who faces up to seven years in jail on “politically motivated” charges of tax evasion, Amnesty International said today.

Ales Bialiatski, head of the Human Rights Centre Viasna (Spring), appeared in a metal cage in a Minsk courtroom on the first day of his trial yesterday.

He is accused of ‘concealment of income on a large scale’ in connection with funds held in personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland which he used to support Viasna’s human rights work in Belarus. He says the accounts were necessary to fund Viasna’s work as the Belarusian government prevented him from holding money inside the country.

“Ales Bialiatski has been caught up in Belarus’ ugly crackdown on human rights defenders and activists. The Belarusian authorities have the right to punish tax evasion as a crime, but these charges are clearly politically motivated and have been created simply to silence his human rights work,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“By refusing to register NGOs and thereby preventing them from operating openly, the government of Belarus is forcing activists like Ales Bialiatski to use bank accounts in neighbouring countries to fund their work. He must be released immediately and unconditionally,” he said.

Since 2005 it has been a criminal offence in Belarus to act in the name of an unregistered organization.

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

Ales Bialiatski, who is also the Vice-Chair of the International Federation for Human Rights, is considered by Amnesty International to be a prisoner of conscience, targeted solely for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression in his work.

He was arrested on 4 August in Minsk by employees of the Department of Financial Investigations in plain clothes after Poland and Lithuania gave Belarusian officials his bank details.

Both Polish and Lithuanian officials have since publicly apologized to Ales Bialiatski and his family for giving the information to the Belarusian authorities. The two countries have also suspended bilateral legal assistance treaties with Belarus over their use of the information.

Ales Bialiatski’s trial is being attended by EU diplomats based in Minsk. However, a large number of international observers who had applied for visas to attend the trial were refused.

There has been an unprecedented deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus

following Presidential elections in December 2010. Key opposition figures have been detained, ill-treated and convicted in unfair trials. Critical NGOs, civil society activists and journalists face continuing harassment and Viasna and its staff have come under increasing pressure from the authorities.

Public Document

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