

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Belarus: Condemned for speaking the truth**

Amnesty International condemned yesterday's conviction of two independent Belarusian journalists for seeking the truth about the spate of "disappearances" in the country.

"The sentencing of these journalists yet again revealed Belarus' inability to brook dissent and allow its small independent journalist community to give voice to widely shared concerns about the fate of a series of high-profile 'disappearances' in the country," Amnesty International stated.

Nikolai Markevich, editor of *Pagonia* newspaper, and Pavel Mozheiko, a staff writer, were sentenced to two-and-a-half and two year terms of 'restricted freedom' respectively for allegedly slandering the Belarusian President, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, in an edition of *Pagonia* in the run-up to last September's presidential elections.

"While the original fears of imprisonment of Nikolai Markevich and Pavel Mozheiko have not come true, it is wholly unacceptable to use criminal law to stifle criticism of the state authorities or to intimidate individuals who voice legitimate concerns about the actions or practices of the state authorities," Amnesty International said.

As a result of their convictions, 40-year-old Nikolai Markevich and 23-year-old Pavel Mozheiko will be subjected to forced labour of the authorities' choosing for the duration of their sentences, severely curtailing their ability to practice their profession.

The 4 September 2001 edition of *Pagonia* newspaper, which was confiscated before being distributed, raised concerns about the alleged involvement of President Lukashenka and his immediate circle of government appointees in the "disappearances" of several leading opposition figures in 1999.

The apparent failure of the Belarusian authorities to investigate these "disappearances" promptly, impartially and thoroughly have also been echoed by a wide range of regional governmental bodies, international treaty bodies as well as domestic and international non-governmental bodies.

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Belarus to take immediate action to ensure that it fulfils its obligations under various international human rights treaties, particularly those concerning the right of freedom of expression.

Leninsky District Court in Grodno, located on Belarus' Western border with Poland, convicted the two journalists on 24 June under Article 367 (2) of the Criminal Code.

Public Document

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