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Crucial week for human rights in Belarus

The Belarusian government's disregard for human rights will once again come under the international spotlight this week when it is confronted with a large-scale pro-democracy demonstration on Wednesday, and a final judgment on former parliamentarian Andrey Klimov on Friday.

"The time is long overdue for the Belarusian government to put human rights firmly back on the agenda", Amnesty International stated today on the eve of a visit to Minsk. "President Alyaksandr Lukashenka must affirm his commitment to respect the right of ordinary Belarusians to speak out against his government".

Thousands of Belarusians will take to the streets to peacefully protest the unpopular presidency of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in Minsk on Wednesday during the Freedom March-2 demonstration. At least 200 arrests and police ill-treatment were reported during the first Freedom March in October 1999. Amnesty International will be observing this week's demonstration and will consider any peaceful demonstrators detained by the police as prisoners of conscience.

On Friday 17 March, Amnesty International will be present at the Leninsky court in Minsk when it passes final sentence on former member of parliament and prisoner of conscience Andrey Klimov. The state prosecutor, Galina Radkevich, has reportedly asked for a prison sentence of nine years and confiscation of property.

Andrey Klimov is a member of the parliament dissolved by President Lukashenka in November 1996. He has been in pre-trial detention for over two years after being charged with financial impropriety, a charge which he has denied and which Amnesty International believes to have been brought against him because of his political opposition to President Lukashenka. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Belarusian authorities to unconditionally release him.

"While human rights continue to be violated, President Lukashenka's government will continue to suffer a crisis of confidence. This week is a crucial week for human rights in Belarus and an opportune time for the government to demonstrate respect for freedom of speech and the right to assemble peacefully", Amnesty International urged.

Background

Belarus' opposition argues that President Lukashenka's mandate to stay in office officially ended in July 1999 and therefore fresh elections should be held. Another demonstration is planned for 22 March 2000.

In November 1996, Andrey Klimov took an active part in the impeachment of President Lukashenka for trying to dissolve parliament. After the dissolution of parliament he continued his criticism of the president, accusing him of violating the law and the constitution. He was

reportedly arrested within days of distributing a document on the presidency to the procurator, police department and all heads of local government in the country.

Andrey Klimov has always insisted upon his innocence and has undertaken two hunger strikes. He was admitted to a prison hospital in July 1998 after the second hunger strike and was reportedly diagnosed as suffering from a heart condition. He has since been transferred back to the prison, but his state of health is reported to be poor. Amnesty International continues to be concerned about the state of his health and has expressed concern about the cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions of his imprisonment.

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