

News Service 056/00
AI INDEX: EUR 49/10/00
23 March 2000

Belarus: Day of Freedom protest must be free from human rights violations

Belarus' opposition groups should not be subjected to ill-treatment or detention during this Saturday's peaceful Day of Freedom march in Minsk, Amnesty International said today in an appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement agencies.

"Last Wednesday's Freedom March-2 showed the international community that Belarusian authorities can allow demonstrations and respect the right to peaceful assembly," Amnesty International stated.

A delegation from Amnesty International, which was in Minsk to observe the demonstration on 15 March, did not record any arrests or incidents of police ill-treatment. The demonstration was well organized and passed peacefully.

"The authorities should ensure that no one will be ill-treated or imprisoned by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly," Amnesty International said today.

Amnesty International will consider any demonstrators who are detained for their peaceful protests as prisoners of conscience.

The Freedom March on 15 March was exceptional in that it was the first large-scale demonstration in recent history in Belarus during which there were no reported arrests or allegations of police ill-treatment.

Background

During the first Freedom March in October 1999 at least 200 demonstrators were detained and there were many cases of police ill-treatment. A number of

the demonstrators were subsequently given administrative prison sentences of up to 15 days and some people still face criminal charges for organizing and participating in the demonstration. There were also reports of police ill-treatment, arrests and detention during similar demonstrations in May and July 1999. Amnesty International adopted the detainees as prisoners of conscience.

The Day of Freedom protest is one among a number of demonstrations the opposition has organized as a protest against President Lukashenka's increasingly unpopular rule. The opposition, as well as a large part of the international community, have argued that President Lukashenka's mandate to stay in office officially ended in July 1999 and therefore he should step down and fresh elections should be held. President Lukashenka has refused to hold new elections and remains in power.

*ENDS.../******

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>

