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## **Belarus: Findings of Human Rights Committee confirm worsening human rights situation**

The findings of the UN Human Rights Committee delivered last Friday only serve to confirm the worsening human rights situation in Belarus, Amnesty International said today as it called on the government to implement as a priority the recommendations of the Committee.

The UN Human Rights Committee examined the fourth periodic report on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) submitted by Belarus on 30 October. Amnesty International briefed the members in advance about the organization's concerns and also held a meeting with the Belarus Government delegation in Geneva in which measures planned by the authorities were discussed.

The Committee noted that *"the human rights situation in Belarus has significantly deteriorated since ... 1992"*. It expressed concerns about *"the persistence of political attitudes that are intolerant of dissent or criticism and adverse to the promotion and full protection of human rights, and the growing concentration of powers, including legislative powers, in the hands of the executive, without judicial control"*.

The Human Rights Committee noted that the number of crimes for which the death penalty is applicable under the Criminal Code is very high, and that decrees defining new crimes punishable by death, such as the Presidential Decree No. 21 of 21 October 1997 on fighting terrorism, have been recently enacted.

"The Human Rights Committee has echoed our concerns about the very high number of executions in Belarus and the secrecy surrounding the procedures relating to the death penalty," Amnesty International said. "It is now time the government took concrete steps to implement the recommendations by the Committee to address this appalling situation."

Belarus was also criticized about the numerous allegations of ill-treatment of persons by police and other law enforcement officials during peaceful demonstrations and on arrest and detention, and about the high number of cases where police and other security officials resort to the use of weapons. Since investigations of such abuses are not conducted by an independent mechanism and the number of prosecutions and convictions in these cases is very low, the Committee expressed concern that these phenomena may lead to impunity for members of the police and other security officials.

"The Belarus Government should implement the Committee's recommendations to ensure that all allegations of ill-treatment and unlawful use of weapons by security and police officials be promptly and impartially investigated by an independent body, that the perpetrators be prosecuted and punished, and that the victims be compensated," Amnesty International said. "It is only then that this cycle of impunity will be broken."

The Committee recommended that the laws and regulations relating to pre-trial detention be reviewed as a matter of priority so as to comply with the requirements of article 9 of the ICCPR. Further, the Committee called on the authorities to abolish the practice of "punishment cells" (*"kartzher"*), in which particularly harsh conditions are imposed on prisoners, and the use

of “press camera” -- a prison cell where a special prisoner, “*pressovshchik*”, is placed among the other inmates to carry out instructions by the prison officials. The Committee urged the Government of Belarus to repeal the old Soviet “*propiska*” system of mandatory resident permits and ensure respect for freedom of movement.

Belarus was also harshly criticized for the serious infringements of the right to freedom of expression and of association. Former prisoner of conscience Tatyana Protko, head of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, was only released from custody in Belarus after protests by members of the Human Rights Committee. She was able to attend the session and brief the members of the Committee together with Nadezhda Zhukova, a young human rights defender who was recently ill-treated in police custody in Belarus.

“If Belarus is to make any claim of being a country where the rights of everyone are equally respected, the government should ensure that human rights activists can function in a society where they are not intimidated, harassed or arrested for their opinions,” Amnesty International said. “It should take heed of the Committee’s recommendations to provide guarantees for the safety and the free functioning of all human rights defenders in Belarus.”

Amnesty International is calling on the President and Government of Belarus to adopt a comprehensive action plan for the implementation of all the Human Rights Committee’s recommendations.

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