

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: EUR 49/001/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 048
10 March 2003

Embargo Date: 10 March 2003 00:01 GMT

Belarus: 'People's March' must not result in violations of people's rights

Ahead of Wednesday's "People's March: For Better Life" Amnesty International is calling on the Belarusian authorities to ensure that the policing of the demonstration respects the right to peaceful protest.

Thousands of Belarusians are expected to take to the streets of Minsk on 12 March in the year's first large-scale protest action in support of human rights and political freedom, and to voice concern about widespread poverty in the country.

"There should be no repeat of the ugly scenes of recent years, which saw peaceful demonstrators being hit, kicked and herded into police vehicles for voicing their concerns on the capital's public squares and streets," Amnesty International said.

"Policing has to be measured in its methods, and it must respect the rights of the people engaged in non-violent protest."

Belarus' intolerance of dissent was seen during the Minsk protest march "We Can't Live Like This!" in April 2002, when at least 85 peaceful demonstrators were detained. More than 30 demonstrators, many of whom belonged to Belarus' active human rights community, were subsequently sentenced to periods of imprisonment between three and 15 days. Like Wednesday's "People's March", the demonstration was called to protest against falling living standards, lack of political freedom and the country's poor human rights record.

"This was only one incident among many in 2002 that highlighted the disturbing tendency of the Belarusian authorities to use repressive measures to stifle peaceful protest -- this must not happen on Wednesday," Amnesty International said.

"Renewed waves of detentions and displays of police brutality must be avoided at all costs."

Amnesty International will be closely monitoring the "People's March" in the light of past crack-downs on dissent. The organization will consider anyone detained for their peaceful protests during the "People's March" a prisoner of conscience.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>