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Belarus: Independence Day Marred by New Wave of Detentions

The year 2003 is already proving to be another unhappy year for peaceful protest in Belarus as the country's much criticized human rights record was yesterday further tarnished by a new wave of repression, Amnesty International stated today.

On 23 March at least 50 peaceful protestors were detained in Minsk city centre during an unsanctioned demonstration staged to protest against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government and to coincide with the 85th anniversary of the creation of the first Republic of Belarus.

"This deplorable incident once again sends a clear signal that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government is intent on riding roughshod over the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the people of Belarus," Amnesty International said.

"It also reveals that political decision-makers in Belarus are as obstinately intolerant as ever of citizens who hold opposing opinions to those of the incumbent administration."

Leaders and activists of political parties, youth organizations and other non-governmental organizations numbered among the detainees, including a member of the dissolved Belarusian parliament Pavel Zhavets, Deputy Chairman of the Belarusian Popular Front Vyacheslav Sivchik, and prominent youth leader Pavel Severinets.

Although a sizeable number of the detainees were released later on Sunday, 14 demonstrators were reportedly detained overnight at the notoriously bleak Okrestina detention facility in Minsk.

Earlier today, the first wave of prison sentences were handed down to demonstrators by Leninsky District Court in the city. Seven participants, who were sentenced to periods of imprisonment between five and 15 days, were among the court's first reported decisions. At least 20 other participants reportedly received official warnings and fines. It is feared that more sentences may ensue in the coming days.

"It is utterly reprehensible that President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government should commit more of its citizens to periods of incarceration after having been repeatedly internationally pilloried for doing so," Amnesty International said.

Barely less than two weeks ago former Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Sannikov, human rights activists Ludmila Gryaznova and Dmitry Bondarenko from Charter-97, and small business leader Leonid Malakhov were arrested and sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment for their role in organizing another mass action in Minsk on 12 March.

Amnesty International considers anyone currently imprisoned for their peaceful part in yesterday's protest action or the 12 March demonstration to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

Public Document

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