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Belarus: Council of Europe urged to consider seriously human rights in Belarus

Amnesty International welcomes tomorrow's planned debate by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on the situation in Belarus and urges it to consider seriously the persistent violations of human rights in the country.

The debate will be based on a report submitted by the Rapporteur of the Political Affairs Committee, Wolfgang Behrendt. The report condemns the persecution of dissidents and the apparent "disappearance" of political opponents, and deplors the fact that Belarus is the only country in Europe which continues to enforce the death penalty.

The report echoes Amnesty International's concerns about the treatment of opposition figures, independent lawyers, trade unionists and journalists under President Alyaksandr Lukashenka since late 1996.

The apparent "disappearances" of leading members of the opposition, such as the former Minister of the Interior, Yury Zakharenko, in May 1999 and head of the unofficial electoral committee, Viktor Gonchar, in September 1999 have caused considerable concern. The whereabouts of both men remain unknown.

Other members of the opposition have been imprisoned for their non-violent political beliefs, including members of the dissolved Belarusian parliament Andrei Klimov and Vladimir Koudinov. In December last year, Andrei Klimov was reportedly beaten and kicked by prison officials and dragged into a Minsk courtroom in torn clothes and without shoes.

Former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir was arrested in March last year on charges of financial impropriety relating to a position he held as head of a bank before he became Prime Minister in July 1994. Amnesty International believes that Mikhail Chigir was deliberately targeted by the authorities after he announced he would stand as a presidential candidate in the unofficial election scheduled for May 1999. He was conditionally released in late November 1999 and his case is currently being heard by a court in Minsk. Like the Rapporteur, Amnesty International fears he may not receive a fair trial.

Hundreds of arrests took place during peaceful demonstrations organized by the opposition throughout the country in 1999. Allegations of police ill-treatment of demonstrators both during and after protest actions have also been common.

"As the silencing of opposition continues unabated, President Lukashenka must be held to account by the Council of Europe," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the authorities to stop the execution of prisoners in Belarus. Information about the death penalty is classed as a state secret and even after a prisoner has been executed the relatives are not informed of the date or place of execution. Twenty-nine people were reportedly executed in the first seven months of the year.

Amnesty International is calling on the Parliamentary Assembly to seriously address the worsening situation in Belarus and use its influence to urge the Belarusian authorities to respect human rights.

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