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Belarus: Crack-down on dissidents continues

The year 2000 has brought no change in the repression of opposition in Belarus as President Lukashenka's government has turned its attention to less well known dissidents outside Minsk and to younger protesters, Amnesty International warned today.

The regional Belarusian Social Democratic Party leader Gennady Garusev was yesterday sentenced to seven days' imprisonment for his part in a peaceful protest in January in the town of Borisov, approximately 60 kilometres north-east of Minsk. On 16 January a small number of protesters unfurled banners during a picket in Borisov condemning continued human rights violations and the ongoing trial of former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir.

Amnesty International is concerned that four more dissidents who took part in the protest and were also arrested and charged and may yet be imprisoned for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of assembly. If they are convicted Amnesty International will consider them prisoners of conscience.

A number of young activists have also been targeted by the authorities and some have reportedly suffered repercussions at their universities and colleges. The case of 18-year-old Natalya Grechukha for allegedly burning a flag during a demonstration in Minsk last year was heard in court this week. If convicted she faces a possible prison sentence.

Other young protestors also face prison sentences for exercising their right to freedom of assembly. Seventeen-year-old Andrei Volobev, 18-year-old Anton Lazarev and university students Gleb Dogel and German Sushkevich were among a number of young Belarusians who were arrested and given administrative prison sentences after the Freedom March demonstration on 17 October last year. The criminal charge of 'malicious hooliganism', which has been frequently used by the authorities to intimidate members of the opposition, has reportedly been brought against the young protestors. Their trials are expected to commence later this month.

Amnesty International condemns this intimidation and repression of dissident voices outside the capital Minsk, and the persecution of younger Belarusians for expressing their peaceful political beliefs and for exercising their right to freedom of assembly.

"By casting its net wider to target opposition everywhere, the Belarusian government is further alienating itself from the community it purports to represent," Amnesty International warned.

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