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## **Belarus: Opposition MP jailed -- the price of opposing a President**

(Minsk) -- Amid chaotic court scenes, Amnesty International was present in Minsk today to witness the high price one pays in Belarus for speaking out against the President.

After more than two years in pre-trial detention, Andrey Klimov, the 41-year-old member of parliament and businessman, started the first official day of his six-year sentence.

After a controversial eight-month trial -- during which Andrey Klimov was hospitalised after being beaten by prison guards and dragged into court without shoes and in torn clothes -- the court found him guilty, among other things, of building without a necessary permit, overdeclaring an amount of building material and financial impropriety.

Amnesty International believes the charges are politically motivated, designed to punish him for speaking out against President Lukashenko's forcible dissolution of Parliament in 1996. The organization considers Andrey Klimov a prisoner of conscience.

"The fate of Andrey Klimov echoes the fate of other politicians who have dared to challenge the authority of President Lukashenko," the human rights organization said.

"Andrey Klimov is one of several opposition figures who have been punished for their political beliefs in recent times."

The arrest of former Belarusian Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir in March 1999 on charges of financial misappropriation caused an international outcry. After spending eight months in prison, he was conditionally released in November 1999. Like Andrey Klimov, Mikhail Chigir is a prominent opposition figure with a past career in the business world who now faces similar charges of corruption and likely imprisonment.

Another member of the dissolved Parliament, Valery Kudinov, who was vocal in his condemnation of President Lukashenko's dissolution of Parliament, was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in 1997.

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