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PUBLIC STATEMENT

BELARUS

Opposition members detained -- government stamps out dissenting voices

A further round up of opposition party members in Belarus in the past two weeks shows yet again the government's intolerance of those who dare to speak out against it, Amnesty International said today.

Opposition groups in Belarus had staged unofficial presidential elections for 16 May in protest against President Lukashenka's increasingly undemocratic regime. Amnesty International has learned of a number of cases where police officers have detained members of the opposition simply for campaigning during this period of protest.

In 1996 President Lukashenka held a referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament. In a further referendum in 1996 he secured a mandate to stay in office until 2001, despite an election being scheduled for 1999. Opposition groups argue that the referendum violated the constitution and therefore President Lukashenka's presidency expires in July 1999. In protest unofficial elections were held on 16 May for which 10 days of campaigns were organized beginning on 7 May.

On 11 May one member of the unofficial electoral commission was reportedly given an administrative sentence of 10 days for violating a law about meetings and demonstrations. Under the Criminal Procedure Code a citizen suspected of a crime can be held for a maximum of 10 days without formal charge. Piatro Zosich had been talking to members of the Hlusk region electoral commission when he was arrested by police officers. Police officers confiscated ballot papers in his possession. His companion, Valery Hniadzko, was reportedly fined one million Belarusian roubles.

On 12 May the vice chairperson of Mahileu region electoral commission, Anatol Fiodaraw, was reportedly sentenced to three days' administrative arrest for failing to appear in court. He and a colleague were detained by police officers on 9 May in Mahileu and told to appear in court on 12 May. The police officers confiscated materials relating to the election. Anatol Fiodaraw claims that illness prevented his appearance in court. Nevertheless, a court in Mahileu proceeded to sentence him.

On 16 May members of the electoral commission were taken into custody in Hrodna. Police officers detained Ales Barel and Kazimir Lokic at a voting station in the city. Two observers at the voting station, Valiantsin Luchko and Mikola Voran, were also detained and ballot boxes and ballot papers were confiscated by the police. Organizers of the unofficial presidential elections were also detained by police officers in a number of other Belarusian towns, including Slomin, Masty and Zelva, and voting materials were confiscated by the authorities. It is not yet known how long the police detained the individuals concerned or whether they were given administrative prison sentences.

“We have repeatedly raised our concerns about the treatment of the country’s opposition with the authorities. However, we are not aware of any steps taken by the government or the President of Belarus to stop the arrests of members of the opposition who choose to peacefully oppose the Belarusian Government,” Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is calling on President Lukashenka to allow citizens to peacefully exercise the right to freedom of expression without the fear of being arrested or ill-treated by law enforcement agencies. The organization is also urging the President to recognise that torture and ill-treatment are prohibited in any circumstances under the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which Belarus is a party.

Background

Throughout 1999 Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the treatment of members of the opposition in Belarus. At the beginning of March 1999 Viktor Gonchar was sentenced by a Minsk court to 10 days' imprisonment for organizing an unsanctioned meeting in a café with other members of the electoral commission. Viktor Gonchar was chairman of the electoral commission before Lukashenka dissolved parliament after the controversial referendum of November 1996. In March he was officially charged under article 190 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus, "Wilful conferment of an official title or authority", which carries a maximum penalty of two years' imprisonment or correctional labour. At a press conference of the electoral commission last week Viktor Gonchar confirmed that the charges against him still stand.

At the end of March the former prime minister, Mikhail Chigir, was imprisoned for his active role in Belarus' opposition and for his intention to stand as a presidential candidate in the unofficial presidential elections. The other main presidential candidate, Zenon Poznyak, has been in exile in the United States and, more recently, in Poland after fleeing the country in April 1996.

Amnesty International believed that Mikhail Chigir like Viktor Gonchar appeared to have been targeted by the authorities solely because of his political beliefs and peaceful opposition activities, and considers him a prisoner of conscience. On Monday, 25 May, around one thousand supporters

of Mikhail Chigir staged a peaceful demonstration in his support in Minsk. Amnesty International understands the demonstration occurred without incident.

On 10 May Amnesty International expressed serious concern for the safety of opposition activist Yuri Zakharenko, who failed to return home on the first day of the campaigns. The organization feared that he may have been in incommunicado detention. Yuri Zakharenko is a senior figure in the opposition movement and was believed to be a member of the unofficial electoral commission. His wife believes that he was arrested for his involvement in the unofficial presidential elections, organized by opposition groups for 16 May. A spokesperson for the Ministry of Internal Affairs is reported to have said that Yuri Zakharenko was not being held in Minsk, and that his whereabouts were unknown. His whereabouts remain unknown. Amnesty International is unaware of an investigation being opened into this case by the authorities.

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