

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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Belarusian activist still languishes in prison, two years on

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/ales-bialiatski-second-anniversary-2013-08-02>

The last time Ales Bialiatski, a Belarusian human rights activist received a prison visit or a food parcel was last February.

“They give you just enough (food) to make sure you don’t die, but it is a diet with very little vitamins and inevitably affects your health. Last year Ales never got any fresh vegetables or fruit,” his wife Natalia Pinchuk recently told Amnesty International.

Today is the second anniversary of his arrest on 4 August 2011. He is currently serving a four and a half year jail sentence for using his personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to fund the Human Rights Centre Viasna. The organization was not officially recognized by the Belarusian government and could not hold a bank account in the country.

Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for his peaceful actions to defend human rights. It believes his trial was deeply flawed and the sentence, politically motivated as part of a strategy to stop his human rights work.

So far, Ales has spent 18 months in Babriusk penal colony #2 – a detention facility where other prisoners of conscience have been held. Conditions of detention are extremely poor, with overcrowded cells and poor food rations.

He is held in a cell with up to 16 other inmates but none of them are allowed to communicate with him in any way under threat of punishment from the prison authorities.

“My main concern is that the lengthy imprisonment will ruin his health,” Natalia said as the second anniversary of her husband’s arrest approaches.

“He is not alone [in the cell],” she says, “but he is isolated which puts additional psychological stress on him.”

The activist should have had a parole hearing this month, however hopes of an early release were dashed when he was declared a ‘malignant violator’ and his privileges, which include limited visits, entitlement to receive food parcels and consideration for parole – were withdrawn.

Among the reasons given by the prison authorities for this punishment was that Ales was wearing the wrong type of shoes.

“I have nothing to ask the Belarusian authorities,” said Natalia. “Because of the injustice that Ales has suffered, I don’t believe that any request will be granted. To ask something of people who have acted with such injustice would be to acknowledge the legality of their actions.”

The authorities in Belarus are notorious for punishing those who speak out about human rights with lengthy prison terms, blatantly disregarding their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

Almost immediately after his arrest, Amnesty International launched a campaign calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Ales and other prisoners of conscience in the country.

Since then, Ales and Natalia have received (hundreds/thousands?) of letters of support from across the world.

“Thank you for the support. It is important that he feels this support because the situation he is in is so difficult,” Natalia said.

Please send a post card of support to Ales at the following address:

Ales Bialiatsky
213807, Magiliouskaya vobl.
g. Babruisk,
vul. Sikorskaga 1
I.K No. 2, atrya No. 14