

AI INDEX: EUR 49/17/99
22 July 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT
Belarus
Government crack-down on peaceful opposition

Amnesty International condemns the arrests and reported ill-treatment of members of the Belarusian opposition during yesterday's peaceful protests against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the capital, Minsk. The organization considers any demonstrators detained for their peaceful protests as prisoners of conscience.

The human rights organization has learned that at least 50 people were arrested by police during the protests in which several thousand demonstrators are reported to have taken part.

Amnesty International is concerned that the arrests may continue today. The human rights organization was informed that a former deputy of the Supreme Soviet and human rights activist, Valery Shchukin, was arrested this morning in Minsk outside the court where the trial of Andrey Klimov is taking place. Andrey Klimov was also a member of the former 13th Supreme Soviet dissolved by President Lukashenka in 1996 and is considered by Amnesty International to be a prisoner of conscience.

Reports indicate that senior members of the opposition were among the many people arrested yesterday. Oleg Volchek, an elected deputy of Minsk city council, was reportedly arrested and beaten unconscious at a Minsk police station. Pavel Znavets, a deputy of the former Supreme Soviet and leading member of the Charter 97 human rights movement, was also arrested. It is not known if the two men have been charged.

One of the leaders of the Belarusian Popular Party, Vyacheslav Sivchik, and Irina Halip, the editor of the independent newspaper '*Imya*', were detained after police caught them in possession of several megaphones. Although they were released afterwards, their companions Anatoly Grikhytik, Yury Ostrovsky and Ivan Suntsov are still reported to be under arrest.

Amnesty International reiterates its appeal to President Lukashenka and the authorities to ensure that no one should be ill-treated, or imprisoned by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly. The organization calls on the authorities to release unconditionally members of the opposition who have been arrested and to respect their right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

Background

In an appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement authorities on Monday this week Amnesty International urged that Belarus' opposition groups should not be subjected to ill-treatment or detention during this week's peaceful protests to mark the official end of President Lukashenka's term. The opposition have argued that President Lukashenka's tenure in office officially ended on Tuesday 20 July and that he should step down and allow fresh elections to be held. ENDS.../

