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## **Mass arrests in Belarus - newspaper editor prevented from leaving the country**

"The confiscation of the travel documents of Irina Halip, editor of the Belarusian independent newspaper *"Imya"* is part of the government's crack-down on peaceful dissent," Amnesty International said today.

Irina Halip was arrested on 22 July, following peaceful protests in the capital Minsk marking the official end of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's term in office, but was conditionally released today.

Amnesty International is concerned that her sudden arrest yesterday and the confiscation of her travel documents may have been timed to coincide with her trip to the United States to attend meetings with fellow journalists this weekend, to prevent her from talking about the political situation in Belarus.

"The government of Belarus must immediately stop its harassment of Irina Halip and allow her freedom of movement," Amnesty International said. "It appears as though she has been deliberately targeted because of her peaceful oppositional stance to the government of President Lukashenka."

"The authorities must also immediately and unconditionally release all those people arrested yesterday solely for their peaceful protests. This is part of a pattern of harassment of opposition groups," the organization added.

"Those demonstrators who have been detained for their peaceful protests are considered prisoners of conscience and include Valery Schukin, a deputy of the Supreme Soviet dissolved by President Lukashenka in 1996, who was arrested yesterday in Minsk."

On Wednesday 21 June police officers reportedly arrested a member of the Youth Front of the Belarusian Popular Party, Timothy Dranchuk, in Minsk, for video-recording police vehicles and beat him at a police station. Outside the capital in the town of Grodno, an activist of the Belarusian Popular Party, Yan Veleovich, was reportedly ill-treated by police officers during the arrest of several other activists, including the editor of newspaper *'Pogonyia'*, Nikolai Markevich.

### **Background**

Law enforcement officials arrested Irina Halip yesterday evening at the Belarusian headquarters of the Russian television station, ORT, where she was scheduled to give an interview. She was arrested on the charge that *'Imya'* had slandered the Belarusian Prosecutor General, Oleg Bozhelko, in an article on 15 July 1999.

Earlier in the day she was detained along with her companions outside the political party headquarters of the Belarusian Popular Front in Minsk, after police caught them in possession of

several megaphones. While she was released several of her companions were not. Two years ago Amnesty International expressed concern about her ill-treatment by police officers after she and her father, Uladzimir Halip, were severely beaten by police officers while taking part in a peaceful demonstration.

The newspaper '*Imya*' has been subjected to repeated harassment by the Belarusian authorities for its anti-government line. From November 1995 to February 1998 the newspaper was forced to print in neighbouring Lithuania after the state controlled printing presses refused to handle the newspaper. Since returning to Minsk the newspaper has been frequently threatened by the authorities for its independent line.

In a public statement issued yesterday Amnesty International condemned the arrests on Wednesday and Thursday of this week of at least 50 people by police in Minsk during peaceful protests, in which several thousand demonstrators are reported to have taken part. The opposition have argued that President Lukashenka's tenure in office officially ended on Tuesday 20 July and therefore he should step down and fresh elections should be held.

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