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Dissent and Impunity in Belarus

Dissent and criticism are routinely subject to state repression in Belarus, Amnesty International said today launching its new report 'Belarus: Dissent and Impunity'.

"The unwillingness of the Belarusian authorities to tolerate dissent and independent thought is unacceptable," the organization added, highlighting the fact that the country's human rights record is marred by practices that are reminiscent of the Soviet era.

"The lack of independence of the judiciary which undermines the rule of law has led to grave abuses and allowed police impunity to flourish," Amnesty International continued.

The report catalogues the numerous human rights violations committed over the past two years. These include imprisonment of opposition figures, possible "disappearance" of opposition leaders, police ill-treatment and large-scale arbitrary detention of peaceful demonstrators and continuing harassment of human rights defenders, academics and independent journalists.

"1999 was a particularly bad year to be a leading member of Belarus' opposition," Amnesty International said. For example, former prime minister and unofficial presidential candidate Mikhail Chigir spent eight months in prison on charges of financial impropriety and is now barred from all political activity for five years.

"Mikhail Chigir is only one among several opposition figures who have been imprisoned on this pretext," the organization added.

Two leading opposition figures apparently "disappeared" at key political moments in 1999 and the Belarusian authorities have shown reluctance to investigate the cases. Former Minister of the Interior, Yury Zakharenko, apparently "disappeared" in May 1999, while in September Viktor Gonchar, chairman of the unofficial electoral commission, and his companion Anatoly Krasovsky also apparently "disappeared".

"Belarusian citizens beyond the realm of politics have also been subjected to arbitrary state action for their unpopular views," Amnesty International said.

The physicist Professor Yury Bandazhevsky, currently awaiting trial in Minsk, spent half of 1999 in prison accused of taking bribes from students. Amnesty International believes he may have been imprisoned for his outspoken criticism of a state-funded research program into the effects of explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor on the population's health.

Throughout 1999 and 2000 Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of hundreds of demonstrators for peacefully protesting against President Lukashenka and questioning the legitimacy of his tenure in office. Opposition groups and a significant part of the international community have argued that President Lukashenka's term in office officially ended in July 1999 and have called for fresh elections.

Mother of three children Olga Baryalai was among at least 200 demonstrators detained during the Freedom March demonstration in October 1999. During the transfer to a detention centre in a police bus officers kicked and punched the detainees, swore and spat at them, hit them with truncheons and forced them to the floor. Upon arrival at the detention centre Olga Baryalai was released, only to be repeatedly

verbally abused by the police officers, who threatened to rape her and punish her and her family.

"The case of Olga Baryalai is only one among numerous cases of arbitrary detention and alleged ill-treatment in Belarus which have come to the attention of Amnesty International," the organization said. "The use of force to stifle criticism appears to be the rule."

Outspoken human rights defenders have not escaped the attention of the Belarusian authorities. The internationally acclaimed human rights lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya has been subjected to repeated harassment and faced the prospect of imprisonment on several occasions. Another prominent human rights defender, Oleg Volchek, head of an independent commission investigating the apparent "disappearance" of Yury Zakharenko, appeared to be deliberately targeted by police officers after a demonstration in July 1999, when he was beaten and knocked unconscious.

The offices of various human rights organizations have also been subjected to inexplicable police raids and had materials and equipment confiscated. Several organizations have been burgled, losing valuable hardware and documents, while others have been threatened with eviction from their offices.

Amnesty International is calling on the Belarusian authorities to improve the country's human rights record by putting an end to the intolerance of dissent and the widespread impunity for human rights violations.

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