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***Belarus: March of Freedom -- the authorities must guarantee the right to peaceful demonstration***

*Belarus' opposition groups should not be subjected to ill-treatment or detention during this Sunday's peaceful March of Freedom protest in Minsk, Amnesty International said today in an appeal to the Belarusian government and law enforcement agencies.*

*"The authorities should ensure that no one will be ill-treated or imprisoned by the police simply for their political beliefs and for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly," Amnesty International said.*

*"Peaceful assembly is a fundamental human right and is enshrined in international law."*

*Amnesty International will consider any demonstrators who are detained for their peaceful protests as prisoners of conscience.*

*The human rights organization is also calling on the authorities to inform all law enforcement officials, assigned to ensure law and order during the protests, 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 state party.*

The opposition has organized a peaceful demonstration for 17 October 1999 as a protest against President Lukashenka's increasingly unpopular rule. The opposition argues that President Lukashenka's mandate to stay in office officially ended in July 1999 and therefore he should step

down and fresh elections should be held. President Lukashenka has refused to hold new elections and remains in power.

The Belarusian authorities have employed a number of draconian laws to silence the peaceful opposition. Under the Criminal Procedural Code of Belarus, protestors can be placed under administrative arrest for up to 10 days without formal charge. During demonstrations organized by the opposition in May and July 1999 Amnesty International received reports of a number of people being given such administrative sentences. The organization adopted the detainees as prisoners of conscience.

### **Background**

In recent months Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern about the human rights situation in Belarus. The organization has received numerous reports of demonstrators being arrested both for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly and expressing their freedom of conscience. Amnesty International believes that the Belarusian authorities have also deliberately targeted prominent members of the opposition, like the leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, Nikolai Statkevich, and the human rights defender, Oleg Volchek, in an attempt to intimidate and silence them for their opposition activities.

The possible "disappearances" of leading members of the opposition, such as the former Minister of the Interior, Yury Zakharenko, in May 1999 and head of the unofficial electoral committee, Viktor Gonchar, in September 1999 have caused considerable concern. Amnesty International has also condemned the Belarusian authorities for imprisoning members of the opposition for their non-violent political beliefs, such as the former Prime Minister Mikhail Chigir and former members of the dissolved Belarusian parliament Andrei Klimov and Vladimir Koudinov, and has adopted them as prisoners of conscience.

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**For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on + 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>**