

AI Index: PRE 01/362/2012
24 July 2012

Belarus urged to release “teddy bear” free speech activist

A photographer and journalism student faces up to seven years in prison after posting pictures of a stunt involving teddy bears to draw attention to violations of freedom of expression in Belarus, prompting Amnesty International to call for his immediate release.

Photographer Anton Suryapin, 20, was detained on 13 July under suspicion of having assisted an organized group illegally to cross the border of Belarus. According to Belarusian law he should have been charged or released before 23 July. He was not released on Monday and Amnesty International assumes therefore that he was charged.

“The charges against Anton Suryapin represent a further nail in the coffin of freedom of expression and association in Belarus, where spurious charges are frequently used in an attempt to silence those working to defend human rights,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“He should be released immediately and the charges against him dropped.”

The charges came after staff of a Swedish advertising company, Studio Total, flew a small plane across the Belarusian border and dropped hundreds of teddy bears carrying placards in support of free speech over north-western Belarus on the country’s Independence Day, 4 July.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defence denies that an aircraft flew over Belarusian airspace without permission and says the video footage of the event was a fabrication.

Suryapin was detained on 13 July after posting the photographs on the website Belarusian News Photos. He stated on the website that he received the pictures from an unknown source. He had no connection with Studio Total and merely posted the pictures as part of his journalistic activities.

Amnesty International considers Anton Suryapin to be a prisoner of conscience, charged solely for the non-violent expression of his conscientiously held beliefs.

Studio Total says the teddy-bear stunt was carried out to highlight the clampdown on freedom of expression in Belarus. Video footage released by the agency on 5 July shows two people wearing teddy bear masks throwing toy bears out of the aeroplane. Police in the Belarus town of Ivyanets gathered up the teddy bears, but eye witnesses interviewed by Radio Free Europe and Belarusian independent media stated that they had seen the teddy bears fall from the aircraft.

Syarhei Basharimau, who works for a rental agency in Minsk was detained on 10 July. He was charged on 16 July under Article 371 Part 3 of the Criminal Code, the same article under which Suryapin is being held, and could also face up to seven years in prison. He reportedly rented a flat to the two Swedes who were supporting their colleagues in the air.

Amnesty International is asking for the charges against Syarhei Basharimau to be dropped and for him to be released.

In an interview with Belarusian news website Charter 97 on 18 July, Studio Total's Tomas Mazetti denounced the arrests and said the Swedish advertising agency had had no contact with Anton Suryapin. He added that Syarhei Basharimau had merely handed them the key to a rental apartment.

Charter 97 reported last week that a 16-year-old girl from Ivyanets was briefly detained, questioned and released, because it is believed she took the photographs posted by Suryapin.

"It's like arresting a bartender who sold us beer in Minsk," Mazetti told Charter97.

Studio Total say that their campaign is inspired by an action in Minsk in February this year, where activist Pavel Vinogradov set up a group of stuffed animals carrying placards calling for Freedom of expression and complaining of police brutality.

Vinogradov was later sentenced to ten days' administrative detention for his action.