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## **Belarusian activist conviction “politically motivated”**

The Belarusian authorities must immediately release a prominent human rights activist convicted today on politically motivated financial charges, Amnesty International said today.

Ales Bialiatski, head of the Human Rights Centre Viasna (Spring), was sentenced by a court in Minsk to four and a half years for “concealment of income on a large scale”.

Viasna has been monitoring human rights compliance in Belarus since 1996, and assisted opposition activists detained after the disputed Belarusian presidential election of 2010.

“The conviction today of Ales Bialiatski is a disturbing sign of the vindictive campaign being waged by the Belarus authorities against legitimate human rights defenders.” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“The charges were blatantly politically motivated, and he should never have been arrested or tried. Ales Bialiatski is a prisoner of conscience and must be immediately and unconditionally released.”

Procedural irregularities during the trial included the questioning of witnesses about Bialiatski’s human rights activism, and their own human rights work.

In his closing statement, Bialiatski declared that his trial and the harassment of human rights defenders contravened the country’s constitution and international obligations. He reminded the authorities of their duties under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, asking:

“Why did you sign the Declaration? If only you hadn’t signed! Leave the UN, leave the OSCE! Then everything will be clear.”

Belarusian human rights organizations function in a hostile environment. They face obstacles when trying to register, and since December 2005 any activity on behalf of a non-registered organization is considered a criminal offence.

In October this year legislation was further tightened to prohibit NGOs from keeping funds in banks and other financial institutions on the territory of foreign states.

“The Belarusian authorities have forced many NGOs to operate their finances outside of the country as part of their attempt to restrict legitimate human rights work and curtail freedom of expression,” said John Dalhuisen.

Bialiatski was arrested on 4 August after Poland and Lithuania gave Belarusian officials his bank details in those countries. He has said the bank accounts were necessary to fund Viasna’s work after the NGO was deregistered by the Belarusian government.

Both Polish and Lithuanian officials have since publicly apologized to Ales Bialiatski and his family, and suspended bilateral legal assistance treaties with Belarus over the use of the information to prosecute him.

Viasna was deregistered by the Belarusian authorities in 2003 and barred from opening a bank account in the country.

The UN Human Rights Committee found the closure of the organization to be in violation of Belarus's obligations on freedom of association.

The human rights situation in Belarus has been in steep decline since the Presidential elections in December 2010. Key opposition figures have been detained, ill-treated and convicted in unfair trials. Critical NGOs, civil society activists and journalists face continuing harassment and Viasna and its staff have come under increasing pressure from the authorities.