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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS--

ILHR CONDEMNS NEW DECREE

In an December 2 protest letter sent to President Lukashenko and Viktor Golovanov, Belarusian Justice Minister, the International League for Human Rights (ILHR) deplored the Lukashenko government's relentless persecution of the Belarusian NGO community, criticizing the recently issued Decree No. 28. [As we reported in the previous issue, on November 28, Lukashenko issued Decree No. 24 "On Receiving and Using Foreign Humanitarian Aid." The new decree introduces measures to control and monitor foreign aid and states that such aid cannot be used for "organizing and conducting meetings, rallies, street marches, demonstrations, pickets, protests, preparing and disseminating propaganda materials, as well as conducting seminars and other forms of political and mass propaganda work among the population." NGOs that are found guilty of violating the decree can be liquidated (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 7). – Ed.]

Noting that Lukashenko's actions "violate the commitments undertaken by Belarus to uphold international standards of freedom of expression and assembly," Dr. Louise Kantrow, the League's Executive Director, called on the Belarusian strongman and his officials to "respect the Belarusian citizens' fundamental human rights and to stop the wholesale assault on democratically oriented civil society in Belarus immediately." (ILHR, December 2)

BELARUSIAN NGOS CRITICIZE NEW DECREE

On December 5, the Assembly of Belarusian Pro-Democratic NGOs, the largest network of independent NGOs in Belarus, severely criticized the new presidential decree, noting that it makes the "legal use of foreign grants in Belarus practically impossible," the Assembly's website reported. In an interview to Radyjo Racyja, an independent Belarusian-language online news service, Tatyana Protska, Chair of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, condemned the new decree as directed "against the Belarusian civil society." (belngo.info, Radyjo Racyja, December 5)

SECRETARY POWELL CRITICIZES HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BELARUS

Speaking at the 11th Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) held in Maastricht, The Netherlands, on December 2, Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State, noted that the government of Belarus is "conducting a systematic campaign against the independent media and against non-governmental organizations," the U.S. State Department reported. Urging the OSCE member states to recommit themselves to advancing human rights, Secretary Powell stressed that "respect for fundamental freedoms is an essential factor for peace, justice and well-being." Addressing a plenary meeting of the Council, Sergei Martynov, Belarusian Foreign Minister, opined that the OSCE should focus on structural reforms. During the summit, Martynov met with Amb. Christian Strohal, Director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). (U.S. State Department, BelTA, December 2-3)

ZUBR ACTIVIST DETAINED

On November 30, Anton S., a minor, was detained and taken to police station for posting opposition fliers in the city of Baranovichi, Brest Region, the movement website reported. He was released after a brief interrogation. In response to his arrest, in the next few days hundreds of fliers featuring the "He Must Go!" slogan were posted at the city market place, on the city executive committee, and police precinct buildings. Commenting on the arrest, local Zubr activists said: "Arrests will not stop us. The last dictatorship in Europe must become history."

On December 1, a banner featuring the "He Must Go!" slogan was put up over a few streets in the city of Zhodino, Minsk Region. On the same day, Zubr activists distributed a few hundred copies of *Sprotivleniye* [*Resistance*], the movement's newspaper, in the township of Maryina

Gorka, Minsk Region. In addition, Zubr activists posted similar fliers in the city of Gomel. (Zubr, December 1)

VIGIL TO SUPPORT POLITICAL PRISONERS

On December 2, Malady Front and Zubr activists, in collaboration with other opposition organizations, launched a series of candle vigils held at the Okrestina Detention Center, where several organizers of the November 24 rally, titled “No To The Third Referendum!” are kept, the press-service of Malady Front reported. Artur Finkevich and Zmitser Dashkevich, Malady Front activists, as well as Vasil Parfyankou, member of the Belarusian Freedom Party, were sentenced to 15-30 days in jail (see Belarus Update Vol.6, Nos. 4-6). According to Malady Front, the vigils will be held each evening until all jailed activists are released. (Malady Front, December 2-5)

EIGHT ACTIVISTS ARRESTED IN MINSK

On November 30, police in Minsk detained eight activists of Nasha Alternatyva [Our Alternative], a civic initiative, which organized an action titled “Public Voting – Third Term,” at market places around Minsk, Charter 97 reported. The activists distributed leaflets, urging people not to participate in a possible referendum on Lukashenko’s third term in office. All the detainees were taken to the Sovetsky Precinct. Lyudmila Hraznova, Andrus Kozel, Aleh Tarasevich, and Ihar Arlou were issued summons and may face fines. (Charter 97, December 1)

OSCE SUPPORTS DEMOCRACY IN BELARUS

The OSCE Office in Minsk (OOM) concluded its project on local democracy and assistance to local governments with an international seminar titled “Conceptual Issues of the Development and Perfection of the System of Local Government and Self-Government” held in the Belarusian capital on December 2, OOM reported. Speaking at the seminar, Amb. Eberhard Heyken, OOM Head, noted that “the new Belarusian concept of self-governance is one of great significance.” (OOM, December 2)

RAPPORTEUR ON DISAPPEARED VISITS BELARUS AGAIN

Christos Pourgourides (Cyprus, EPP/CD), a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) legal committee, arrived in Minsk on December 1 on his information gathering mission concerning the disappearances of Yuri Zakharenko, Viktor Gonchar, Anatoly Krasovsky, and Dmitry Zavadsky, Charter 97 reported. [He first visited Belarus on November 5-8, see Belarus Update Vol. 6, No. 4. – Ed.] In an interview to Deutsche Welle, German radio service, Pourgourides said that he was unable to meet all the officials he hoped to see. “These meetings were cancelled by the authorities,” he said.

In addition, Pourgourides met with Vladimir Rusakevich, Belarusian Information Minister, to discuss a forthcoming PACE meeting that will consider a draft report on media freedom in Belarus. (Charter 97, December 2-4)

AUTHORITIES INCREASE PRESSURE ON PARENTS OF LYCEUM PUPILS

Local police inspectors started visiting the parents of children who continue to attend the National Humanities Lyceum, an independent Belarusian academy, closed by authorities before the start of the school year, Viasna Human Rights Center reported. According to Viasna, the policemen tell the parents that they may face penalties for refusing to bow to pressure from the government to disperse children to state schools. For more on the Lyceum story, please see the articles "Belarusian Parents Struggle for Independent School," "Lyceum Battles In Court, Intellectuals Plan Congress" published by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (Un)Civil Societies," on August 7 and November 20, respectively. (Viasna, December 4)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

BELARUSIAN AMBASSADOR: RUSSIAN MEDIA IS WELCOME IN BELARUS

At a meeting with Russian journalists in Moscow on December 3, Amb. Vladimir Grigoryev, Belarusian ambassador to Russia, denied that the Lukashenko government has been trying to drive out Russian media outlets, BelTA reported. "The Belarusian leadership does everything possible to ensure that all Belarusian residents exercise their constitutional right to receive complete and accurate information," Amb. Grigoryev said. Commenting on the recent closure of the Minsk bureau of NTV, an independent Russian TV company, the Ambassador pointed out that the Belarus state-owned stations continue to re-broadcast NTV's programming. (BelTA, December 3)

SMORGON INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER LOSES IN COURT

The Belarusian Supreme Economic Court denied an appeal filed by *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* [*The New Paper of Smorgon*], an independent newspaper published in the township of Smorgon, Grodno Region, the Belarusian Journalists Association reported. The newspaper asked the court to reverse a three month suspension imposed on the newspaper by the Belarusian Information Ministry. Basing his suspension order on Art. 20 of the Law on the Press, Vladimir Rusakevich, Belarusian Information Minister, halted the newspaper publication on October 2, 2003. According to Andrei Bastunets, an attorney with the Belarusian Association of Journalists' Law Center for Media Protection who represented the newspaper in court, it will "take a lot of efforts" on the part of the newspaper to resume publishing again. (BAJ, December 3)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

AUTHORITIES TURN BLIND EYE ON ANTI-POLISH ACTIVITIES

In an interview to Belapan, Eugeniusz Skrabotsky, editor-in-chief of *Magazin Polski*, a Polish language publication, complained that anti-Polish graffiti are becoming common in the city of Grodno, which is located on the Belarusian-Polish border and has a large Polish population. According to Skrabotsky, vandals painted an insulting anti-Polish graffiti on the Union of Poles' headquarters on November 30. A similar incident took place in August. Skrabotsky noted that there was no official reaction to these and other instances of desecration of crosses on the military and Catholic cemeteries in Grodno, Lida, and Volkovytsk. (Belapan, December 3)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

YOUTH DEMAND DECISIVE ACTIONS

Following a meeting with the leaders of the Five Plus electoral bloc, Vladimir Kobets, coordinator of Zubr Youth Movement, criticized the bloc leaders for "their failure to realize the importance of youth participation in the forthcoming electoral campaign," Zubr website reported. [Known as the Five Plus (5+) group, the electoral bloc, which includes three major opposition parties, the United Civic Party, the Belarusian Popular Front and the Belarusian Party of Communists, along with the smaller Labor Party and the Social Democratic Society, was formed in July 2003 to create a broad democratic platform ahead of the next October's parliamentary election. – Ed.] According to Kobets, at a meeting with Malady Front and Zubr activists, the Five Plus leaders were unwilling to cooperate with the two major opposition youth organizations. "All they want is blind obedience on our part. We consider such an approach unproductive and erroneous," Kobets added (Zubr, December 3)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

BELARUSIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS VISIT IRAN

A Belarusian delegation headed by Vadim Popov, chair of the Belarusian Parliament's House of Representatives, visited Iran on December 1-2, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) reported. The parliamentarians met with President Mohammad Khatami, Mehdi Karroubi, chair of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, Kamal Kharrazi, Foreign Affairs Minister, Mohamad Shariatmadari, Commerce Minister. Officials on both sides stressed that on the inter-state level the two countries have no obstacles in developing the cooperation in trade, technology transfer, and other areas. Alluding to the U.S.- Iraq conflict, both Tehran and Minsk officials stressed that they are "against interference of foreign military forces in domestic affairs of other countries." President Khatami indicated that he intends to visit Minsk early next year. (IRIB, December 3)

BELARUSIAN STRONGMAN SLAMS U.S. OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

In a December 4 interview to *Al-Ba'ath*, a Syria-based newspaper, Alexander Lukashenko labeled the U.S. intervention in Iraq an “aggression,” adding that the main lesson of the U.S. occupation must be that “no superpower will be able to crush a nation that wants to be independent and live according to its own laws,” BelTA reported. The interview came ahead of Lukashenko’s next week visit to Syria. Commenting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Lukashenko urged Israel to withdraw from the Occupied Territories, noting that terrorist act against Israel will not cease otherwise. (BelTA, December 4)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

12 YEARS LATER, RUSSIANS REGRET SU COLLAPSE

According to an opinion poll conducted among 1,500 Russian citizens by the ROMIR independent research center on November 20-24, most Russians (64 percent) regret the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russia Journal reported. About 16 percent of the respondents said they approved the dissolution, 17 percent said they did not care, and 3 percent were undecided. About 59 percent of respondents believe the collapse could have been prevented, and 35 percent think it was inevitable. On December 8, 1991, the leaders of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine signed an agreement that dissolved the Soviet Union, creating the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). (Russia Journal, December 5)

...AND CONSIDER COMMON CURRENCY

There is still a possibility that the Russian ruble may become the single currency of the Union of Russia and Belarus in 2005, Mikhail Kasyanov, Russian Prime Minister, told the Council of Ministers of the Union of Russia and Belarus on December 2, Interfax reported. His Belarusian counterpart Sergei Sidorsky, Acting Prime Minister of Belarus, agreed, stating that “Belarus sees no reason to drag out the introduction of the Russian ruble as its sole legal tender.” according to the Belarusian National Bank, Russia agreed to provide Belarus with a stabilization loan to ensure financial stability after the two countries introduce the Russian ruble as the sole currency in Belarus. (Interfax, December 2-4)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

“Neo-liberalism leads nowhere and is promoted by certain countries to establish their hegemony,” Alexander Lukashenko, in an interview to *Al-Ba'ath*. (BelTA, December 4)

“Belarusian legal profession plays a tremendous role in securing the rule of law, in building a country that is based on the rule of law, and in instilling respect to the law in our society,” Alexander Lukashenko’s Day of Jurist address. (BelTA, December 5)

-- UPCOMING EVENTS --

December 10 – International Human Rights Day, a commemoration action titled “We Remember” to be held in Minsk, Warsaw and other European cities

December 10 – PACE considers the Belarus Parliament’s request for restoration of its Special Guest status

December 11 – PACE considers a draft report on media freedom in Belarus

-- CORRECTIONS --

A story on the U.S. Helsinki Commission (CSCE) re-printed in the previous issue incorrectly identified the source of information as a CSCE press-release. In fact, the story originally appeared in the CSCE Digest.

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the Belarus Human Rights Support Project of the International League for Human Rights, www.ilhr.org. The League, now in its 62nd year, is a New York-based human rights NGO in consultative status with the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the International Labor Organization. Visit www.belarusupdate.org for back issues, analysis, and links to news sites and NGOs in Belarus. Letters to the Editor: vcole@ilhr.org, subscription services: otarasov@ilhr.org

The Belarus project was established to support Belarusian citizens in making their case for the protection of civil society before the international community regarding Alexander Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
