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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

BELARUS CELEBRATES HUMAN RIGHTS DAY, POLICE MAKES ARRESTS

On December 10, International Human Rights Day, commemorative actions titled "We Remember" were held in Minsk, Borisov, Vitebsk, Warsaw and other Belarusian and European cities, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarusian Service reported. The protests were initiated by Svyatlana Zavadskaya and Iryna Krasouskaya, wives of the disappeared journalist Dmitry Zavadsky and businessman Anatol Krasouski, respectively. The protests were then supported by the European Coalition Free Belarus, Coalition 5+, National Strike Committee, National Humanities Lyceum, Malady Front and Zubr Youth Movements, Belarusian Freedom Party, Charter 97, and other NGOs.

About five hundred people formed a chain along Skaryna Avenue, Minsk's main thoroughfare, holding candles and pictures of the disappeared. Despite the peaceful nature of the action, plain clothed agents arrested Natalya Kalyada, a journalist and Charter 97 member.

On December 10, dozens of Zubr activists gathered in downtown Borisov, Minsk Region, the movement's website reported. Carrying candles and photographs of the disappeared, the youth handed out fliers describing the action. After about 30 minutes, police detained eight activists, including four juvenile protesters. After police reports were filed, the detainees were released.

On the same day, police in Brest detained Nina Davydouskaya, who was distributing fliers about the International Human Rights Day at the Tsvetatron TV plant, Viasna Human Rights Center reported. According to Uladzimir Vyalichkin, chair of the Viasna local chapter, she was taken to the Moskovsky Precinct.

A December 10 action organized by the United Civic Party members to commemorate the missing opposition leaders took place in the city of Bobruisk, Minsk Region, the party's press-service reported. After about an hour, police dispersed the protesters.

On December 10, the Moldova chapter of the Amnesty International held a picket at the Belarusian Embassy in Chisinau to protest against the Belarusian authorities' continuing crackdown on the civil society, Charter 97 reported. (RFE/RL, Zubr, Charter 97, Viasna, UCP, December 10)

BELARUSIAN PARLIAMENT DECRIES "DOUBLE STANDARDS"

Addressing his colleagues on International Human Rights Day, Valery Lipkin, chair of the Belarusian Parliamentary Commission on Human Rights, Ethnic Minorities and Mass Media, maintained that Belarus is committed to human rights and is sincerely interested in establishing good relations with relevant international organizations, BelTA reported. "Unfortunately," the deputy noted, these relations remain "complicated" due to the policy of "double standards applied to Belarus." (BelTA, December 10)

...AND ENDORSES DRACONIAN DECREE

Making a mockery of the International Human Rights Day, the December 10 session of the Belarusian Parliament's House of Representatives endorsed the infamous Decree No. 24 "On Receiving and Using Foreign Humanitarian Aid," BelTA reported. The new decree, issued by the Belarusian authoritarian ruler on November 28, 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. 7-8). (BelTA, December 10)

VIASNA ACTIVISTS LAUNCH VISITING CAMPAIGN

On December 7, Tatyana Revyaka, Viasna activist, Volha Zavadskaya, mother of the missing journalist Dmitry Zavadsky, and journalist Ales Dashchynski visited Uliana Zakharenka, mother of the missing former Interior Minister Yury Zakharenka, in the town of Vasilevichy.

On December 10, Valyantsin Stefanovich, Uladzimir Labkovich, Viasna activists, and journalist Henadz Barbarych visited Viktor Ivashkevich, ex-chief editor of *Rabochy*, an independent newspaper, Viasna reported. Ivashkevich is serving a two-year internal exile term in the city of Baranovichy, Brest Region, for allegedly slandering Lukashenko in 2002 (see Belarus Update, Vol. 5, No. 51). Although Ivashkevich was recently denied parole (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 7), he will be released on December 16, due to the 2003 general amnesty. According to Viasna, Ivashkevich intends to resume his political activities after his release.

Viasna activists plan to continue the campaign by visiting Valyantsyna Hanchar, mother of the missing 13th Supreme Soviet deputy Viktor Hanchar, and Kseniya Krasouskaya, mother of the missing businessman Anatol Krasouski. (Viasna, December 7-10)

ACTIVISTS ARRESTED, FINED FOR DISTRIBUTING LEAFLETS

On December 7, Viktor Novikau, member of the Chastnaya Sobstvennost [Private Property] party, was arrested while handing out fliers urging people to attend the We Remember action. He was taken to Police Precinct No. 1, charged with a violation of Art. 167 of the Administrative Offences Code and released the next day, Viasna reported. On December 8, Judge Zhdanok of the Leninsky District Court fined Novikau 330,000 Belarusian rubles (\$150).

The League notes that the Belarusian authorities have recently started aggressively persecuting activists for distributing leaflets, fliers and other printed material containing invitations to participate in mass protest actions. For example, Artur Finkevich, Malady Front activist, recently spent a month in jail for distributing leaflets urging people to attend a rally to protest Lukashenko's possible third term in office. [Under the Public Actions Law, an organizer of a mass action may inform the public about its date and place only after securing all the necessary permits from the authorities. - Ed.] (Viasna, December 9)

U.S. EMBASSY: AMERICANS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT SITUATION IN BELARUS

In a December 10 statement, the U.S. Embassy in Belarus expressed concerns about the human rights situation in the country. Noting the growing difficulties facing NGOs, independent trade unions, and the media, the Embassy reminded the Belarusian government about its obligations enshrined in the Belarusian Constitution and international agreements to support and guarantee the human rights of all Belarusian citizens. See the full text of the statement at www.minsk.usembassy.gov

Also, on International Human Rights Day, Amb. George Krol met with Iryna Krasouskaya and Svyatlana Zavadskaya, wives of two of the disappeared, to express the sympathy and moral

support of the American people for the families of all disappeared persons. (U.S. Embassy, December 10)

OSCE HUMAN RIGHTS CHIEF: ENDS CAN'T JUSTIFY MEANS

On December 10, Amb. Christian Strohal, Director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), warned that "war on terrorism" is used by some countries as an excuse to suppress legitimate expressions of dissent and limit precious freedoms. Addressing an international conference in London, Amb. Strohal noted that governments should combat terrorism in full accordance with international law and to resist a temptation to apply the ends justify the means principle. (OSCE, December 10)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

OSCE MEDIA FREEDOM WATCHDOG: SITUATION GOT WORSE

On December 11, in his final report to the Permanent Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Freimut Duve, OSCE Media Freedom Representative, lamented a deterioration in media freedom in many OSCE member states. "The new media openness of the mid-1990s in some states has been replaced by a constant fear of oppression," he said. During his six-year tenure as the first OSCE media watchdog, Mr. Duve a German politician, publisher and human rights activist, visited almost all of the 55 participating States in the OSCE and issued hundreds of reports and statements. [A staunch supporter of independent media, he was denied an entry visa to Belarus in 2003 (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 1). – Ed.] Echoing Amb. Strohal's concerns, Duve expressed regret that the OSCE that "used to pride itself on being a community of declared democracies changed its policy outlook in 2003 more toward global threats to security than to its deteriorating human rights record." The current media freedom record in some of our member states is "more problematic than when I took this job in 1997," he concluded. (OSCE, December 11)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

PASTOR FINED, VOWS TO PERSEVERE

On December 11, the Executive Committee of the City of Kobryn, in the Brest Region, fined Mikalay Radkevich, pastor of a local Evangelical Church, 50,000 Belarusian rubles (\$23) for "holding an unauthorized church service," Forum 18 News Service, a religious freedom watchdog based in Oslo, Norway, reported. [The harsh 2002 Law on Religion prohibits public services of unregistered religious organizations. - Ed.] Prompted by a police report filed on November 23, the Committee based its decision on Art. 9.9.1 of the Administrative Offences Code (Violations of the Law on Religion). Radkevich told Forum 18 that the parish will continue to meet for worship, "no matter what." According to the pastor, his church is not registered, although it was established in 1952 and currently has about 300 parishioners. [Under Art. 9.9, a

repeated offence within a year may be punished by a much harsher fine in the amount of \$100 - \$200. - Ed] (Viasna, December 11)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

LUKASHENKO: NEW DUMA TO CEMENT RUSSIA-BELARUS RELATIONS

Following the December 7 Russian Parliamentary elections, Alexander Lukashenko said he expects the new Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, to strengthen relations between Belarus and Russia, Interfax, a Russian news agency reported. At the December 8 government meeting on the Belarusian foreign policy, Lukashenko noted that “many prominent Russian politicians who are sincere friends of Belarus have won the elections.” While expressing some interest in improving relations with the West, the Belarusian strongman stressed that Russia “has been and remains a priority in the Belarusian foreign policy.”

Lukashenko comments came after the Russian Communist Party (KPRF), which has historically been his main backer in Moscow, lost the elections to United Russia, a pro-Putin party. By stressing his allegiance to Russia, Lukashenko is clearly trying to win new friends in Duma, whose support he desperately needs in dealing with Belarus’s economic woes. (Interfax, December 9)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

LUKASHENKO: RUSSIAN COMMUNISTS CAN COUNT ON ME

The Communist Party of Russia “can in difficult times count on the Belarusian President,” Lukashenko told Gennady Zyuganov, KPRF leader, on December 12. Zyuganov arrived in Minsk to attend the 7th Congress of the Communist Party of Belarus (KPB), a pro-Lukashenko communist party, and to attend a parliamentary hearings on the Russia-Belarus economic integration, the website of Pravda, a Russian communist newspaper, reported. At the meeting with Lukashenko, Zyuganov stressed that the KPRF had always spoken for the equal union of the two states, noting that “the party want[s] this union to materialize.” The 7th Congress re-elected Valery Zakharchenko, a deputy of the Belarusian Parliament’s House of Representative, the Secretary General of the pro-government Communist Party of Belarus, Belapan reported. (Pravda, Belapan, December 13-14)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

EU AMBASSADORS: BELARUS NEEDS UNTIED DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

On December 9, representatives of the European Coalition Free Belarus (ECFB) met with the ambassadors of the current and ascending EU member-states. Mikalai Statkevich, Andrei Sannikov, Valyantsyna Matusevich, Nina Stuzhynskaya, Leanid Malahau and Valery Dranchuk

presented the Coalition's goals and objectives to the Italian, British, German, French, Sweden, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian ambassadors. Among the chief questions discussed was a possibility of creating the united democratic opposition ahead of the 2004 parliamentary elections. (Charter 97, December 9)

NEW HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATION EMERGES IN BELARUS

On December 9, the eve of the International Human Rights Day, in Minsk, a convention of 27 prominent human rights activists and opposition politicians established the Human Rights Alliance of Belarus, Radyjo Racyja, an independent Belarusian-language online news service, reported. Lyudmila Hraznova, a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet illegally dissolved by Lukashenko in late 1996, was elected the Alliance chair. The Alliance Supervisory Council includes Andrei Klimau and Uladzimir Kudzinou, former 13th Supreme Soviet deputies who spend several years behind bars for advocating the removal of Lukashenko from power following the 1996 referendum; Vasil Staravoitau, former director of the Rassvet agro-industrial enterprise who was imprisoned for two years for allegedly embezzling state credits; Mikhail Chyhir, former Belarusian Prime Minister who in 1996 resigned in protest at Lukashenko's refusal to cancel the controversial referendum and was later prosecuted; Iosif Hanchar, brother of Viktor Hanchar, a disappeared opposition politician; Mart Laar, former Estonian Prime Minister, and Irina Khakamada, co-chairperson of the Russian Union of Rightist Forces political party. Noting that the authorities are currently trying to decimate the civil society in Belarus, Hraznova said the organization will not "waste time on trying to register in Belarus and instead will seek registration in Lithuania." (Radyjo Racyja, December 10)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

PARIAH STATES, UNITE!

On his December 9-10 visit to Damascus, Alexander Lukashenko met with President Bashar al-Assad, and Muhammad Naji Otri, Syrian Prime Minister, Middle East Online Service reported. Talks focused on the political situations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe and bilateral relations. The parties signed seven cooperation agreements in areas of economy, science, technology, tourism, and health. "Syria is Belarus's most important partner in the Arab world," Lukashenko said. He also expressed support for the Syrian position that all conflict in the Middle East should be resolved "according to UN resolutions," and that Iraq's future should be decided "within the framework of international law." It should be noted that Lukashenko's current visit (he last visited Syria in 1998) came two days before President Bush signed legislation [H.R.1828, titled "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003"] that aims to punish Syria for alleged ties to terrorists, tacit support for insurgents in Iraq, and efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction.

On December 8, Belarus and Saudi Arabia signed a General Cooperation Agreement, BelTA, a Belarusian news agency reported. (Middle East Online, BelTA, December 8-12)

WIPO DIRECTOR MEETS WITH BELARUSIAN LEADER

Dr. Kamil Idris, Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a UN agency that administers 23 international treaties on intellectual property protection, met with President Lukashenko, at the WIPO's Geneva headquarters on December 11, the WIPO news service reported. Dr. Idris and Lukashenko agreed on the strategic importance of intellectual property in the future economic, social and cultural development of Belarus and pledged to continue joint activities to further this vision. WIPO's initiatives in Belarus include a range of activities and training programs to modernize intellectual property legislation, upgrade enforcement mechanisms, and strengthen the role of intellectual property in the scientific, technological and economic activities undertaken in Belarus. (WIPO, December 11)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

“Our society shall stand on the following three pillars: powerful Soviets representing the people, strong youth organizations, and capable, revitalized trade unions,” Alexander Lukashenko. (www.president.gov.by, visited December 14)

-- UPCOMING EVENTS --

December 15 – PACE considers a draft report on disappearances in Belarus

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.
