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Edited by Victor Cole

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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

BELARUSIAN COURTS CONTINUE NGO LIQUIDATION SPREE

On December 24, the Belarusian Supreme Court Judge Svyatlana Yakhnavets upheld the Justice Ministry's decision to deny registration to the Assembly of Pro-Democratic NGOs, the largest network of independent NGOs in Belarus, Radyjo Racyja reported. Originally submitted in 2002, the registration application was formally denied by the Justice Ministry 17 months later, in October 2003 (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 4). According to Natalya Kebikava, who represented the Ministry at the December 24 hearing, the denial was based on a recommendation of the Republican Commission on Registration of Public Associations. [The Commission was formed by the notorious Decree No. 2 of January 26, 1999 and is currently headed by Oleg Proleskovsky, deputy chief of the Presidential Administration. – Ed.] The Assembly allegedly failed to verify its legal address to the Commission. Kebikava also insisted that several founding members of the Assembly were liquidated while the Ministry was still reviewing the Assembly's registration application. (Radyjo Racyja, December 26)

ACTIVIST FINED FOR DISTRIBUTING LEAFLETS

The Belarusian authorities have begun to persecute activists more aggressively for distributing leaflets, fliers and other opposition printed material, Radyjo Racyja reported. The Moskovsky District Administrative Commission in the city of Brest fined Nina Davydouskaya, chair of the local branch of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), 49,000 Belarusian rubles (\$23). On December 10, Davydouskaya was arrested while distributing fliers about the International Human Rights Day at the Tsvetatron TV plant in Brest. She was charged with distribution of the printed materials containing solicitations to participate in unauthorized mass protest actions (see Belarus Update Vol. 6, No. 9). (Radyjo Racyja, December 26)

OPPOSITION LEADER FINED FOR CAMPAIGNING AGAINST REFERENDUM

The Partizansky District Administrative Commission in the city of Minsk fined Lyudmila Hraznova, a deputy of the 13th Supreme Soviet illegally dissolved by Lukashenko in late 1996 and the chair of the newly established Human Rights Alliance of Belarus, 25,000 Belarusian rubles (\$11), Charter 97 reported. Hraznova was detained on November 30, along with seven other activists of Nasha Alternatyva [Our Alternative], a civic initiative, which organized an action titled “Public Voting – Third Term” at market places around Minsk (see Belarus Update Vol. 6, No. 8). 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. Hraznova, Andrus Kozel, Aleh Tarasevich, and Ihar Arlou were charged with “unauthorized dissemination of printed materials” and issued summons. (Charter 97, December 29)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

LOCAL JOURNALIST RECEIVES HEAVY FINE

The District Court of Stolin, the Brest Region, fined Alyaksandar Ihnatsyuk, publisher of *Vyacherny Stolin*, a local independent daily, 495,000 Belarusian rubles (\$225), *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)*, an independent weekly, reported. Ihnatsyuk was charged with insulting an official under Art. 369 of the Belarusian Criminal Code. Before the 2003 local elections, he wrote a series of articles in which he compared Uladzimir Pashkevich, a former chair of the Stolin City Executive Committee, to Pan Ottoman Gritsan Tavrichesky [a gang leader and a character from a popular Soviet era comedy – Ed.]. (BDG, December 29)

OFFICE OF INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER SEALED BY AUTHORITIES

On December 26, the editorial offices of *Mestnaya Gazeta [The Local Newspaper]*, an independent newspaper published in the township of Smorgon, the Grodno Region, was

cordoned off by the authorities on the pretext that it does not meet the fire department regulations, Radyjo Racyja reported. The same day, on the outskirts of Smorgon, police stopped a van and confiscated 5,700 copies of the newspaper's latest issue. Ramuald Ulan, the newspaper's editor-in-chief, who was in the van, and the driver were taken to a local police station. Both were released about two hours later. [In November 2003, the Belarusian Supreme Economic Court denied an appeal filed by *Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni* (*The New Paper of Smorgon*), another independent newspaper published by Ramuald Ulan (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 8). – Ed.] (Radyjo Racyja, December 29)

PARLIAMENT PUTS NEW PRESS LAW ON HOLD

Deputies of the House of Representatives, the lower chamber of Lukashenko's rubber-stamp parliament, did not consider the new draft Press Law before leaving for the Christmas recess, Charter 97 reported. Mikhail Pastukhou, head of the Belarusian Association of Journalists' Law Center for Media Protection and former Belarusian Constitutional Court justice, believes, however, that the adoption of the new law is just a matter of time. In an interview to Charter 97, Pastukhou expressed his concern that the introduction of the new law may lead to a nationwide re-registration of media outlets, arranged by the authorities to hamper the work of independent media before the 2004 parliamentary elections.

Local and international observers say that the new law, which covers not only print and broadcast media but also the Internet, contains numerous provisions restricting freedom of expression, including onerous registration, licensing and accreditation requirements all administered by institutions that are not independent of the government. The complete analysis of the new law was done by ARTICLE 19, an international media freedom watchdog, and is available at www.article19.org (Charter 97, December 26)

INTERNATIONAL WATCHDOGS CONDEMN CURBS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In light of the increasing harassment of independent media around the world, on December 18, Ambeyi Ligabo, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression; Freimut Duve, OSCE Media Freedom Representative; and Eduardo Bertoni, OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, issued a joint declaration condemning "attempts by some governments to limit freedom of expression and to control the media and/or journalists through regulatory mechanisms which lack independence or otherwise pose a threat to freedom of expression, the UN website reported. Comprising three parts: "On the Regulation of the Media," "On the Restrictions on Journalists," and "Investigating Corruption," the declaration can be accessed at <http://www.unhchr.ch/> (UN, December 19)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

PATRIARCH ALEXY II: MEETING WITH POPE CURRENTLY IMPOSSIBLE

Patriarch Alexy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), does not believe a meeting with Pope John Paul II is currently possible, Interfax, a Russian news agency, reported. “Unfortunately, we see nothing specific being done to improve the relationship between our churches,” the Patriarch told a press-conference in Moscow, adding that about a dozen Catholic monastic orders are currently engaged in aggressive missionary activities in Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus. According to Alexy II, the Catholic missionaries focus primarily on orphanages, where they baptize or re-baptize kids to raise them in Catholicism.

The League notes that Alexy II has had longstanding differences with Pope John Paul II over alleged Roman Catholic proselytism in predominantly Orthodox territories. The relations between the Holy See and the Moscow Patriarchate have further deteriorated after the Vatican upgraded its presence in Russia by setting up four new dioceses in the past few years. The ROC sees the Pope’s visit to any of its traditional territories as an affront to the Orthodox Christianity, which split from what is now the Roman Catholic Church in 1054. Though proposed on several occasions, the idea of a meeting between the Pope and the Russian Patriarch has met fierce opposition in Moscow. In the past, Aleksandr Lukashenko professed willingness to host such a meeting (see Belarus Update, Vol.4, Nos. 4, 26). (Interfax, ILHR, December 31)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

LUKASHENKO CONGRATULATES COMPATRIOTS ON BSSR ANNIVERSARY

On December 31, the 85th anniversary of the foundation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), Aleksandr Lukashenko addressed the nation, saying that “the sovereign Belarus has preserved and developed the best achievements of the Soviet era,” BelTA reported. According to the Belarusian strongman, Belarus “continue[s] to build a strong, flourishing state on the solid foundation laid in the [Soviet past].” (BelTA, December 31)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

ONE OF FOUR BELARUSIANS WOULD ALLOW DICTATOR TO SKIRT TERM LIMITS

According to a survey of the Belarusian public opinion conducted by the Minsk-based Independent Institute for Socioeconomic and Political Studies, 24 percent of Belarusians would allow Lukashenko to run again for the Belarusian presidency in the 2006 presidential election, while 56 percent would not, Charter 97 reported. Fourteen percent of those surveyed intend to vote for a candidate supported by the authorities, and 38 percent are most likely to choose an independent candidate; 12 percent would support a candidate from a wide coalition of social and political forces. The poll was conducted by face-to-face interviews with 1,111 people throughout the country on December 10-18, 2003. (Charter 97, December 30)

OPPOSITION POLITICIANS DISCUSS 2003

In an interview to Belapan, Mikalai Statkevich, chair of Narodnaya Hramada, the Belarusian Social Democratic party, and Syarhei Kalyakin, leader of the Party of Communists of Belarus (PKB), the opposition Communist party, agreed that the March 2003 local election was the most notable event of the past year. "Considering the election conditions, 24 seats won by [Narodnaya Hramada] is not a bad result," Statkevich said. Despite PCB winning 169 seats in the local Soviets [Councils], however, Kalyakin commented that the 2003 election did not bring the country any closer to democracy.

Yaraslau Ramanchuk, deputy chair of the United Civic Party (UCP) and director of Strategy, a independent Belarusian think tank, believes that the major achievement of the Belarusian democratic opposition in the year 2003 was the formation of the Five Plus (5+) electoral bloc, which includes three major opposition parties: the UCP, the PKB, the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) and two smaller Labor Party and the Social Democratic Society. In Ramanchuk's opinion, another noteworthy development was a crisis in the Belarus-Russia relations that derailed the implementation of all major joint projects such as the privatization of Belarus' oil industry, and the formation of the monetary union. (Belapan, December 30)

OPPOSITION PARTY RECRUITS NEW MEMBERS

On December 31, a United Civic Party (UCP) branch in the city of Novopolotsk, the Vitebsk Region, gave out a few thousands 2004 calendars with UCP's logo, with an invitation to join the Party and "make a difference in the people's lives," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarusian service reported. For the Belarusians in provinces, who hardly receive any "freebees," the calendars were a real New Year present. No arrests were reported. (RFE/RL, December 31)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

LUKASHENKO COURTS NEWLY ELECTED DUMA CHAIRMAN

On December 30, in his congratulatory message to Boris Gryzlov, the newly elected chair of the Russian Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, Lukashenko said that he was confident that Gryzlov would contribute to strengthening relations between Russia and Belarus, the Belarusian President website reported. (www.president.gov.by, December 30)

RUSSIANS ARE STILL WELCOME IN BELARUS

Commenting on the rights violations of Russian citizens living in the CIS and the Baltic states, Eleonora Mitrofanova, First Deputy Russian Foreign Minister, said that "the situation with the rights of Russian-speaking people is best in Belarus," Interfax reported. "In other [post-Soviet] countries, Russians face various limitations on their rights," she said. "We are still concerned about a large number of Russians in Latvia and Estonia not having citizenship, and there are serious concerns about the situation in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan," Mitrofanova concluded. (Interfax, December 31)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

FROM BELARUS TO CUBA WITH LOVE

On December 31, the Belarusian strongman congratulated his Cuban counterpart on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of the Cuban revolution, Belapan reported. The Cuban Embassy, opened last year (see Belarus Update, Vol. 5, No. 51), hosted a reception at which Amb. Leon Karbalio, Cuban Ambassador to Belarus, assured the guests that the high level of Belarusian-Cuban relations is based on good friendly relations, which have lasted for many decades. (Belapan, December 31)

U.S. AMBASSADOR, BELARUSIAN DEFENSE MINISTER DISCUSS COOPERATION

On December 23, Amb. George Krol, U.S. Ambassador to Belarus, and Colonel General Leonid Maltsev, Belarusian Defense Minister, met at the Military Academy in Minsk to discuss the current state of the U.S.-Belarusian military cooperation. During the meeting, Amb. Krol emphasized that the U.S. policy with regard to Belarus continues to emphasize the country's sovereignty and independence and its eventual integration into the trans-Atlantic community of nations as a strong, prosperous democratic country. The U.S. Ambassador stressed that the Belarusian government should undertake concrete steps on the path to democracy to allow U.S.-Belarusian military cooperation to flourish. See the full text of the statement at minsk.usembassy.gov (U.S. Embassy, December 23)

BELARUS, NATO TO LAUNCH A TWO-YEAR PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

In an interview to Belapan, Syarhei Bulyhin, an aide to the Belarusian Defense Minister, said that within two months Belarus and NATO are to launch a two-year partnership program, Belapan reported. The program, approved by both sides at the NATO Brussels headquarters on November 26, 2003, provides for 183 events in 21 areas of cooperation. According to Bulyhin, it includes political consultations within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace initiative, and participation in joint military exercises. The Ministry official added that Belarus currently "does not request a special partnership status" similar to one Russia and Ukraine enjoy. (Belapan, December 29)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

"A lot has been done to establish order in [Belarus]. One can hardly find a better place to live," Aleksandr Lukashenko, in his annual New Year address to the nation. (BelTA, December 31)

"Only 20 percent of Belarusians trust police," Aleh Hulak, Executive Director of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee. (RFE/RL, December 29)

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 Aleksandr Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
