

March 23-30, 2004

Edited by Nate Young
www.belarusupdate.org

BU EXCLUSIVE:

Interview with Christos Pourgourides of the Council of Europe (Cyprus)

Last week, the Belarus Update conducted an interview via email with Christos Pourgourides, Council of Europe parliamentarian who recently published a report on his investigation into the cases of disappeared opposition leaders in Belarus. (For full text of report go to: www.belarusupdate.org)

In 1999 and 2000, three well known political opposition leaders and a TV cameraman disappeared in Minsk. Pourgourides's report points to several high level Belarusian government officials who were ostensibly responsible for the kidnapping and murder of these individuals. The International League for Human Rights has been following the situation closely since the beginning. On March 10 in Washington D.C., the League brought Irina Krasovskaya, wife of one of the disappeared Anatoly Krasovksy, to speak about her case before the House Committee on International Relations. In her testimony, she discussed her struggle to learn the truth about the fate of her husband and the others who went missing. Mr. Pourgourides has played a crucial role in achieving that end.

BU) What prompted you to become the Rapporteur on the case of the Belarusian disappeared and what were some of your chief expectations going into this investigations?

CP) I come from Cyprus as you know. As a result of the Turkish invasion in 1974 and the military operations of the Turkish army more than 1600 Greek-Cypriots went missing. I have first hand experience of the agony to have a relative or close friend missing.

Besides this I regard the intentional disappearance of somebody as one of the worse types of human rights violations. My chief expectation was to assist in setting in motion procedures for the proper and independent investigation of the said disappearances.

BU) You state in our introductory remarks that the main purpose of your mission was not to conduct a criminal investigation or find out who did what, but simply to conclude whether Belarusian authorities properly investigated the disappearances. Clearly there are numerous holes in their investigation, which you suggest indicate a cover up, and you mention by name certain high-level officials, including the president, who may have been responsible. Does this mean that the mission then changed?

CP) No the mission did not change. There was no proper investigation of the disappearances and the responsibility for this lies squarely with the regime. To say simply that there was no proper investigation is not good enough. You must try and trace the reasons behind such unacceptable behavior. In doing that we managed to establish various acts. The rest are deductions from the facts. The facts clearly establish a cover-up. In Belarus is impossible to have such a cover-up without the approval of the President, express or tacit.

BU) What were some of the biggest obstacles encountered in your investigation?

CP) The biggest obstacle was the inability to meet and interview all those involved. I am sure that if we were able to meet and interview those convicted for the abduction of Dmitry Zavadsky we would have been able to get from them some very important answers. Another obstacle was the widespread fear of many people who had relevant information but were afraid to disclose all they knew.

BU) One of the disappeared is a member of the media, ORT cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky. Your other report that will be tabled at this coming session of PACE reveals how independent media and freedom of expression are under attack in Belarus. How serious are the dangers for journalists working in the country and could they face the same fate as Zavadsky?

CP) You must be a very brave man or woman to be a journalist in Belarus today, working for independent media. I met some journalists who really impressed me with their courage and dignity. So long as the international community is watching carefully what goes on in Belarus I don't think that it is possible for the regime to repeat what it did to Zavadsky. But car accidents.....or heart attackscannot be ruled out.

BU) Your report recommends imposing sanctions against Belarus for failing to bring those responsible for the disappearances to justice. How confident are you that international pressure will succeed and in what form do you think sanctions should come if Belarusian authorities continue to be uncooperative?

CP) I advocate sanctions not only for failure to bring those responsible to justice but mainly for the undemocratic and oppressive way that president Lukashenko runs the country. In Belarus there are daily serious violations of democratic principles and grave abuses of basic human rights. International pressure is the only language that regimes of this type understand.

I am confident that international pressure will succeed especially if Russia joins the rest of the international community in imposing sanctions. The form of sanctions is a matter of international cooperation.

BU) This is a very bold and scathing report. And in the past the Council of Europe has been criticized for not taking a strong enough stance on violations of human rights. How was your report received and was there any pressure to draft a more toothless version of the report?

CP) The report was approved by the Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee of the P.A.C.E. unanimously! I am confident that the report would receive similar backing by the other members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe has never tolerated violations of Human Rights. But in some cases it approached violations more leniently when the governments involved were co-operative. Grave violations always must draw the strongest possible condemnation.

Table of Contents

I. Domestic

1. Lebedko Interrogation Postponed (*Charter 97*)
2. New State TV Chairman Appointed (*Interfax*)
3. Freedom Day Marred By Arrests (*Charter 97*)
4. Deputies To Convene at Spring Session (*BelaPan*)
5. Soviet-style Propaganda is Back in Belarus (*IWPR*)

II. Regional

6. Rushailo to Become an Expert... on Russia in Belarus? (*BelaPan*)
7. Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Calls on Mass Media Outlets to Join Forces (*RIA Novosti*)

III. International

8. NATO Encircles Belarus (*BelaPan*)

IV. Human Rights & Independent Media

9. Amnesty International Issues Statement on Belarus (*Amnesty*)
10. Sen. Ben “Nighthorse” Campbell Supports Belarus Democracy Act (*U.S. Congress*)
11. Belarus Representative Responds to Allegations Made at UN Human Rights Commission (*UN*)
12. Belarus Helsinki Committee Speaks at Commission (*IHF-Belarus*)

V. Business

13. Lukashenko Attracts Investment with Collective Farms (*RFE/RL*)
14. Russia Ready to Supply Gas to Belarus (*RIA Novosti*)

DOMESTIC

1. Lebedko Interrogation Postponed

The first interrogation of United Civil Party leader Anatoly Lebedko scheduled for March 23 was postponed because his attorney was absent. Anatoly Lebedko is accused of slandering the president during an interview he gave on the program “Zerkalo” [Mirror] on Russian TV channel “Rossia.” The politician criticized the Belarusian leader for short-sighted economical policy, a shady budget, and hiding the truth about disappeared opposition leaders. [text revised by the Editor]

Source: *Charter 97*; March 23, 2004; www.charter97.org

2. New TV Chairman Appointed

Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko appointed Vladimir Matveichuk chairman of the State TV and Radio Company.

Prior to his appointment, Matveichuk was in charge of personnel and ideology at the Polotsk Fiberglass Company.

The president noted Matveichuk’s “invaluable experience related to ideology, which not one of the acting members of the government possessed. This person is intellectual, witty, a team-player, able to systematically carry out work.”

According to Lukashenko, “the leader of television isn’t just involved with ‘broadcast.’ he also has the ability to manage the staff and successfully solve economic problems.” These are the urgent matters affecting Belarusian state television.

“There is work that needs to be improved up, because for the state this is the most important sector.”

The president noted that state television is often accused of being the president’s television. “I cannot allow raging anarchy in mass media, especially on crucial television channels. First National is the main channel in the country. Therefore the director and the staff of the state television company will continue to be wholly supported by the state. [translated from Russian by the Editor]

Source: *Interfax*; March 24, 2004; <http://interfax.minsk.by>

3. Freedom Day Marred by Arrests

A Celebration of the 86th anniversary of the BNR [Belarus National Republic, also known as Freedom Day—Ed.] ended in harassment by the police and arrests. About 20 people were arrested during the Freedom Day. Most of them are famous politicians and human rights activists, including: leader of the party Belarusian Popular Front Vincuk Vyachorka; chairman of the Human Rights Center Viasna Ales Byalatsky; activist of the BPF [Belarusian Popular Front] Vladimir Kishkurna; activists of opposition Vyacheslav Sivchik, Valentin Baranov and Yevgeny Skochka;

lawyer of Viasna Valentin Stefanovich; activist of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada Valentin Matskevich. [text omitted]

Source: *Charter 97*; March 25, 2004; www.charter97.org

4. Deputies to Convene at Spring Session

At the spring session of parliament, which opens April 2, deputies plan on reviewing around 100 issues. In the first reading, they are proposing to review more than forty bills and around thirty at the second reading.

The majority of the draft laws, seventeen, were prepared for discussion by the national security committee. The committee on international business and affairs will look at eighteen draft laws.

In April, the deputies plan to discuss the list of government activities, presented by Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky. Parliamentary hearings on problems related to Chernobyl are also set to take place. [translated from Russian by the Editor]

Source: *Belapan*; March 29, 2004; www.naviny.by

REGIONAL

5. Rushailo to Become an Expert... on Russia in Belarus?

Minsk and Moscow are abuzz with rumors that Vladimir Rushailo, Russia's former secretary of national security, may be his country's next ambassador to Belarus.

The Moscow daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* believes that Minsk hasn't taken a liking to the current Russian Ambassador Aleksandr Blokhin. First, they accuse him of connections with the opposition. Second, they believe his alleged contacts with unnamed international structures "are interested in weakening Lukashenko's power."

However, *NG* missed one important fact about the current ambassador-- his strong defense of Russia's interests in Belarus. In particular, Blokhin prevented many a Russian car shipper from being confiscated by Belarusian customs.

Vladimir Rushailo is called the "heavyweight" of Belarus-Russia relations. Perhaps the single fully functioning program in the framework of the virtual Union Government [Belarus-Russia Union- Ed.] is the cooperation between the two countries' military and security agencies. This is largely due to the role of Russia's former secretary for national secretary.

Vladimir Rushailo is not a dark horse for Minsk. In January, he visited the Belarusian capital for a full four days. In addition to standard national security issues, Rushailo and his Belarusian counterparts discussed "energy security," meaning gas supplies to Belarus. During his trip, the secretary met not only with the "siloviki", but also with Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky and head of the presidential administration Ural Latypov.

This year, Belarus will have parliamentary elections, and in 2006--presidential. As any Russian journalist will tell you, Moscow is in dire need of someone credible in the eyes of the Belarusian leadership. That is, if during the elections there arises some kind of problem it'll be difficult to find a better figure than Rushailo for "diffusing" the crisis. Moscow has already been pricked by the "Rose Revolution" in Georgia. The Russian leadership wouldn't want to face such a scenario to happen in Belarus (a more pro-western politician replacing Lukashenko).

And if the Kremlin, however, finds a replacement for the unpredictable Aleksandr Lukashenko, the *NG* predicts Moscow could use certain documents in its possession to discredit the Belarusian leadership in connection with the disappeared opposition politicians.

If there is compromising material of that sort then there's another question of when and how it will be published. The daily further believes that should negotiations on this subject take place in Minsk, it will be Rushailo who will conduct them. And if this matter escalates further, Rushailo will be able to handle the pressure from the Belarusians or to attract the local siloviki to his side.

According to political scientist Vitaly Silitskovo, nothing good is in store for Minsk if Rushailo is appointed ambassador.

"I am afraid that if a silovik and not a diplomat is appointed ambassador, this will seem like a secret mission rather than diplomacy. To pick a silovik for ambassadorship is to make clear that there will be neither the 5-billion-dollar purchase of "Beltransgas" nor an equal partnership between Belarus and Russia. Remember the time when the US appointed Michael Kozak ambassador to Belarus, and everybody started talking about his previous career, including his experience of exporting democracy to Nicaragua.

If Rushailo becomes ambassador, it will clearly show that there can be no export of democracy from Russia. Maybe the only thing that can be exported to Belarus is Russia itself. Rushailo will be very different from Blokhin, who limited himself to strong statements here and there. His appointment will be more about politics than diplomacy.

It's worth to mention that this appointment will be a demotion of sorts for Rushailo. And he will do everything in his power to rejoin Russia's political elite."

Political scientist Viktor Chernov believes that as ambassador, Rushailo will not be making decisions independently.

"Judging by his experience and close contacts with the Belarusian siloviki, Rushailo appears to be a supporter of close integration. Aleksandr Lukashenko will find in Rushailo a loyal partner and co-champion of the integration idea.

Still, Rushailo is without a doubt a man of Putin. And I think he will faithfully carry out the president's orders. If there is a conflict and if Russia once again decides to pressure Belarus in any way, Rushailo will drop his support for integration to defend Russia's interests.

How political will this appointment be? It is too early to judge, even if Rushailo were appointed today. In such an event, one will have to view Rushailo in the context of Russian policy toward Belarus." [translated from Russian by the Editor]

Source: Kirill Poznyak, Nezavisimaya Gazeta; March 25, 2004; www.naviny.by

6. Belarusian Ambassador to Russia Calls on Media Outlets to Join Forces

It is the duty of Russian and Belarusian mass media outlets to provide a mutual information environment beneficial to both countries, Vladimir Grigoryev, Belarusian Ambassador to Russia, said in a Novosti interview.

This is a key objective in bilateral cooperation. The media based in the two countries must make constructive efforts toward unity.

The majority of Russian-based media outlets are circumspect in their coverage of bilateral integration. The Russian press is displaying ever greater respect with regards to the Russian-Belarusian union. Belarus is grateful to see all that.

Nevertheless, a united Belarusian-Russian information environment still remains one sided. Every Belarusian, with token exceptions, can watch telecasts by Russia's leading companies, and it is no problem buying Russian periodicals in Belarus, with more than three thousand

available. Belarus has far scantier chances to circulate its information in Russia. Russians are ignorant of the Belarusian television, and only seldom ever see a Belarusian newspaper or magazine, the diplomat pointed out with regret.

He called on Russian national and provincial media outlets to make encouraging and unbiased coverage of Belarusian politics and social and economic developments. That would come as a promising contribution to the union cause.

It is every Belarusian's constitutional right to receive reliable and exhaustive information about the situation in and outside his country. The Belarusian head is doing everything possible for every citizen to enjoy that right, emphasized Mr. Grigoryev. [text revised—Ed.]

Source: *Natalia Belova, RIA Novosti; March 29, 2004; <http://en.rian.ru/rian/index>.*

7. Soviet-style Propaganda is Back in Belarus

[text omitted] The campaign, which is reinforced by recruitment into old-style youth movements outside of school, has divided teachers along generational lines. Most older ones see it as a welcome response to drug abuse and low moral standards among Belarusian adolescents, while many younger ones say it will have a stifling effect on students.

Six months after the government called for schools to put up portraits of Lukashenko, Alexander Segodnik, head of the local education department in Grodno, told IWPR that efforts to supply every classroom in the area are well underway. His department, he said, has already placed an order which will allow every one of the 36 schools under its jurisdiction to receive portraits of the same “proper quality”.

Besides the presidential portrait, classrooms are also now required to display the new state banner and flag, an almost an exact copy of the old Soviet Belarusian one, minus only the star, hammer and sickle.

It comes down to individual schools to cover the cost of these adornments. To that end, School No. 7 is collecting about one US dollar from each pupil. Twenty dollars per class should be enough to pay for Lukashenko's portrait, a flag and a banner, all mounted in an attractive wooden frame.

But prominently displayed state symbols are not the only method employed in schools as part of the government's effort to capture the hearts of Belarus' youth.

Last summer, the ministry of education ordered class masters to conduct a fifteen minute discussion with their pupils every week about contemporary domestic and international affairs. These are to be consolidated with an extra monthly talk, which should last at least one hour.

Class masters must also keep a record of how they have brought state ideology into the classroom, and that now forms part of the basis for assessing their professional performance. Those who support the new system say it will produce a higher caliber of high-school graduate.

Outside of school, young Belarusians are further exposed to government ideology through officially sanctioned youth movements. During Soviet times, all school pupils were forced to join one of two organizations, depending on their age – the Young Pioneers for the youngest children, and Komsomol for the older ones. These movements were designed to prepare individuals for membership of the Communist Party.

President Lukashenko is keen to make sure such institutions don't die out. He recently resurrected the Pioneer organization and has established a new movement, the Belarusian Republic Youth Union, BRYU, to fill the space left by Komsomol [text omitted- Ed.]

Source: Irina Cherniavka, Institute for War and Peace Reporting; <http://www.iwpr.net/>; original title: "Old-school Propaganda"

INTERNATIONAL

8. NATO Encircles Belarus

On March 29, the NATO family grew bigger with the inclusion of new European countries. NATO notably expanded its menu with Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as three former Soviet countries—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. A ceremony to initiate the seven new countries of the military block will take place in Washington. On April 2, NATO will officially raise seven new flags, for a total of 26 countries.

As a result of the upcoming expansion, our country will be bordering by three NATO countries—Lithuania, Latvia and Poland. What will be Minsk's official reaction, considering its well-known suspicion of NATO's activities and plans?

Political scientist Andrei Fedorov believes that Belarus will continue its policy of cautious engagement with NATO while keeping the attitude that NATO is unnecessary.

An expert from "Belarusskie Novosti" [Belarusian News] points out that not much has changed since the adding of seven new states, considering that Poland, an earlier member, is on our very border. A couple hundred kilometers of new border with the NATO member states will not affect the balance of powers. Neither does it matter in a hypothetical NATO-Belarus conflict. This issue can only serve as fodder for internal politics in Belarus and Russia.

At the same time, NATO's expansion will likely lead to a stepped-up military cooperation between Belarus and Russia. Kremlin can expect a fat bill from Lukashenko, for defending not only Belarus, but also Russia, from NATO's threat.

Anrei Fedorov says that Belarus and Russia will be able to respond to NATO's enlargement as soon as the block reveals its plans for strengthening its presence on our borders. For example, if Americans decide to plant their bases in Poland or the Baltics, we can expect to see Russian military bases on our territory. In exchange, the Belarus authorities may want some concessions, including cheaper gas. After all, every cloud has a silver lining.

Valery Suryaev, head of Presidential Research Center on Geopolitics, does not believe that NATO's enlargement will change the state of military affairs on the continent. The military potential will not increase significantly.

Nonetheless, in the military-political and military-geopolitical terms, continues Suryaev, the expansion is very important. With its military presence on the new members' territory, NATO will expand its sphere of influence to within striking distance from the border areas.

According to Suryaev, Russia and Belarus could hardly respond to a NATO attack in an adequate fashion considering the uneven distribution of strength. It will be necessary to try to find diplomatic solutions and compromise; seek alliances rather than confrontation, including alliances within NATO, which has a host of its own internal conflicts.

The entry of three former Soviet republics into NATO has once again demonstrated that nothing is impossible in politics. One fine day Belarus might find itself in NATO. Fedorov thinks this can happen much faster than the entry of Belarus into the European Union. As an example, Romania and Bulgaria encountered little difficulty joining NATO, while their acceptance by the European Union has been delayed due to economic reasons.

To join NATO, Belarus must meet two conditions: first, a desire by the government, second, Russia's acquiescence. [translated from Russian by the Editor]
Source: Kirill Poznyak, *BelaPan*; March 29, 2004; www.naviny.by

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

9. Amnesty International Issues Statement on Belarus

Human rights defenders are subject to a deliberate pattern of obstruction, harassment and intimidation by the Belarusian authorities to ultimately silence them, Amnesty International said today publishing its report *Belarus: Stifling the promotion of human rights*.

"On a daily basis human rights defenders in Belarus face obstacles in exercising their rights to freedom of association and assembly as well as violations of their right to receive and impart information about human rights," Amnesty International said.

A disturbing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), directly and indirectly engaged in the promotion and defence of human rights in Belarus, have been closed on the basis of controversial legislation and regulations, widely considered as restrictive, by a judiciary whose independence has been repeatedly called into question by the international community. None of the organizations that have been closed down or people who have been arbitrarily detained or fined were able to appeal successfully in court.

"As more and more organizations are closed down, human rights defenders will be targeted on a personal basis, as they are no longer part of recognized, 'registered' organizations", Amnesty International said.

Restrictions on the freedom of expression have not been favourable for the promotion of human rights and civil liberties. Access to most media is therefore increasingly not available to human rights defenders, including independent trade union activists. Raising awareness about human rights and disseminating information about alleged human rights violations in Belarus has become increasingly difficult.

"A next target seems to be internet-based publications, one of the only media outlets currently able to function more or less independently, Amnesty International warned.

"We call on the Belarusian government to adhere to the principles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders."

The publication of the report *Belarus: Stifling the promotion of human rights* comes at a time when the human rights situation in Belarus is under consideration by the UN Commission on Human Rights which is convening for its 60th session in Geneva 15 March - 23 April. Amnesty International calls on the Commission to urge the Belarusian authorities to:

1. end harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders;
2. undertake an immediate review of laws, regulations and administrative practices relating to the registration and activities of NGOs;
3. end the practice of detaining people solely for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association;

4. cooperate fully with the human rights mechanisms of the UN, including through issuing a standing invitation to the Special Procedures of the Commission.

Source: Amnesty International; March 29, 2004; www.amnesty.org

10. Sen. Ben “Nighthorse” Campbell Supports Belarus Democracy Act (full text of statement)

Mr. President, in recent days the Belarusian Prosecutor General's office opened criminal proceedings against one of the leaders of the embattled Belarusian democratic opposition, Anatoly Lebedka [sic]. Anatoly, who is chairman of the United Civic Party, has been accused of defaming Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenka during an interview with Russian television last month where he linked the recent Belarusian-Russian dispute over gas deliveries with the Belarusian authorities' failure to build an efficient economy. Anatoly also mentioned a shadow budget replenished through illegal arms sales and the cover-up of the truth about political disappearances in Belarus.

Given the pattern of behavior of the Lukashenka regime, it is crystal clear that this case is politically motivated and designed to suppress dissent. Lebedka's United Civic Party is a member of the Popular Coalition Five Plus, an opposition bloc which is planning to field candidates in this fall's parliamentary elections.

The action against Anatoly Lebedka and on the opposition fits squarely within a pattern of the suppression of independent thought and action in Belarus. Lukashenka's repression of those who would dare to challenge him has only intensified over the past year. Just last week, a criminal case was opened against the Belarusian Helsinki Committee chairperson Tatiana Protska and accountant Tatiana Rudkevich. This comes after politically-motivated economic sanctions were imposed on the Committee recently. Also within the last few days, a court seized property of Iryna Makavetskaya, a correspondent for one of Belarus' leading independent newspapers, *Beloruskaya Delovaya Gazeta*.

Mr. President, Lukashenka has a choice - he can continue to act as a pariah, suppressing the voices of democracy in Belarus, or he can realize that the only way to reverse his self-imposed isolation from the international community and, increasingly, from his own people is to end his offensive against democracy and civil society.

Meanwhile, Mr. President, it is essential that the United States back up its rhetorical support for democratic forces in Belarus through concrete assistance. Earlier this Congress, I introduced the Belarus Democracy Act, a measure with bipartisan support designed to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law in Belarus. In light of the campaign of repression against democratic forces in Belarus, timely consideration of the Belarus Democracy Act is warranted. I urge colleagues to support this important legislation.

Source: U.S. House of Representatives; March 25, 2004

11. Belarus Representative Responds to Allegations Made at UN Human Rights Commission Meeting in Geneva

Sergei Aleinik (Belarus) said human rights violations should be condemned wherever they occurred, and international cooperation in the field of human rights should be broadened. But constructive dialogue under item 9 had been replaced by political and, sometimes, economic pressure based exclusively on power. It was hard to believe in the sincerity of Western countries when they used selectivity and double standards to identify issues for consideration by the Commission under this agenda item.

The use of human rights issues as a means for achieving political and economic goals was destined to fail and was contrary to the very concept of human rights. Unilateral measures against

sovereign States, the practice of political pressure, the use of discredited principles must end. The Commission, the most authoritative United Nations body in the sphere of human rights protection, should avoid politicization and steadily increase the efficiency of its activities. The Commission should discontinue the practice of examining so-called country resolutions, and should shift its efforts to elaborating universal standards for human rights and to offering recommendations for their implementation in the spirit of constructive cooperation with national Governments. [excerpt]

Source: UN; March 25, 2004; www.un.org

12. Belarus Helsinki Committee Speaks at Commission

On March 23-26, Dmitry Markushevsky, member of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC), participated in the 60th session of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva in discuss the situation of human rights in Belarus.

During the session of the Commission the BHC presented a special report about the human rights situation in Belarus following the passage of resolution 2003/14 during last year's Commission session in April, 2003. The report was based on monitoring reports carried out by the regional offices of the BHC and covers issues such as "On the disappearances and/or arbitrary death of three political opposition leaders by the acting government," "On unlawful arrests and detention," "On torture and inhuman treatment," "On the right to a fair trial," "On the strengthening of restrictions on the activities of religious organizations," "On freedom of expression and mass media," "On the freedom of association," "On the participation in the direction of government." The report contains reports about human rights, alternative information to the presiding representatives from Belarus at Geneva.

Also, the IHF [International Helsinki Federation] disseminated information at the session a special announcement about the human rights situation in Belarus which expressed its grave concern about the government's pressuring of civil society and criminal charges on members of the BHC. The IHF urged the Commission to take effective measures and to call upon the government of Belarus to adhere to its political and human rights obligations. [text omitted; translated from Russian by the Editor]

Source: Belarusian Helsinki Commission; March 29, 2004; <http://bhc.unibel.by/>

BUSINESS

13. Lukashenko Attracts Investment with Collective Farms

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has issued a decree aimed at attracting investment from Belarusian companies in state-owned collective farms, Belapan reported on 22 March. The decree stipulates that companies taking control of ailing farms before 2006 will be entitled to deferments on those farms' lingering debts, tax arrears, and overdue utility bills. According to the presidential press service, the decree will radically change the situation in the agricultural sector and provides a chance for "hundreds" of collective farms to become profitable. Belarusian Television reported the same day that more than 40 percent of Belarus's collective farms are losing money.

Source: RFE/RL; March 23, 2004; www.rferl.org

14. Russia Ready to Supply Gas to Belarus

Russian independent natural gas producers are ready to supply over 1 billion cubic meters of gas to Belarus in April.

"We are ready to continue gas deliveries to Belarus in April. So far 500 million cubic meters at the previous price (\$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters) has been sent to Beltransgaz," says Denis Vinogradov, head of TransNafta's gas department.

When asked about the total volume the company is ready to deliver to Belarus in April, he was evasive, "So far we are not ready to say whether we can increase the supply volume [from 500 million] and if we can, whether the republic will need it".

The international group Itera also confirmed its willingness to resume gas supplies to Belarus in April amounting to 500 million cubic meters.

"The company is ready to deliver the previously agreed upon volume of gas to the republic at a price of \$46.68 per 1,000 cubic meters," Itera's press secretary Yevgeny Ostapov said.

At present the only gas supplier to Belarus is Gazprom's subsidiary Sibur, which on March 23rd signed a contract with Beltransgaz on deliveries of 420 million cubic meters of gas to the country. Earlier the company had signed an agreement on gas deliveries to Belarus in 2004 amounting to 1 billion cubic meters, 200 million out of which has been supplied in March.

Gazprom cancelled its gas deliveries to the republic on January 1, 2004. [text revised by Editor]
Source: RIA Novosti; March 29, 2004; <http://en.rian.ru/rian/index.cfm>

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. To send letters to the Editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Nate Young at: cis@ilhr.org.

For current and back issues, list of events, and more information about the League's advocacy activities in Belarus, please visit the Belarus Update website at: www.belarusupdate.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 Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
