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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

PACE RATIFIES REPORT ON POLITICAL DISAPPEARANCES

On January 27, the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) unanimously ratified a report on political disappearances in Belarus prepared by Rapporteur Christos Pourgourides (Cyprus, European People's Party), reported Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarusian Service (RFE/RL). Based on Pourgourides's two visits to Belarus (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, Nos. 4, 8, 10; Vol. 7, No.2, 3), the Report severely criticizes the Belarusian authorities, stating that "steps were taken at the highest level of the State actively to cover up the ... disappearances" of several high-profile members of the Belarusian opposition and that "senior officials of the State may themselves be involved." In a draft recommendation, the Committee called for a truly independent investigation of the disappearances and an investigation into the alleged involvement of Viktor Sheiman, Prosecutor-General, Yury Sivakov, Sports Minister, and Colonel Pavlichenko, a special forces officer. (RFE/RL, January 27)

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION URGES AGAINST PACE REINSTATEMENT

At a January PACE session, the Belarusian opposition, represented by Yaraslau Ramanchuk, deputy chair of the United Civic Party, and Mechyslau Hryb, deputy head of the Belarusian Social Democratic Hramada, urged the PACE not to restore Belarus's guest status because it continues to fall short of the Council's human rights and civil liberties standards, reported Belapan. The House of Representatives, lower chamber of the Lukashenko rubber-stamp parliament, failed to send its representatives to Strasbourg. [The guest status was granted to Belarus on September 16, 1992, as the first step to the country's admission to the CoE. Following the controversial November 1996 referendum on constitutional changes in Belarus, PACE suspended the guest status in January 1997. – Ed.] (Belapan, January 27)

NGO LIQUIDATION SPREE CONTINUES

On January 29, Judge Aksana Budouskaya of the Minsk City Court ordered the liquidation of the Independent Association of Legal Research, reported Viasna Human Rights Center. On December 22, the Belarusian Supreme Court upheld two warnings issued by the Minsk City Executive Committee Justice Department (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 4), which provided the necessary legal grounds for the liquidation. On November 5, the Minsk City Court declined the appeal filed by the Association. Alyona Tankachova, the Association's chair said that her colleagues are ready to continue working even without registration. (Viasna, January 29)

ANOTHER HUMAN RIGHTS NGO FACES CLOSURE

The Lukashenko regime continues to abuse tax inspections to harass democratic NGOs, reported Belapan. On January 28, after conducting a number of tax audits, the Minsk Moskovsky District Tax Inspection ordered the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to pay 380 million Belarusian rubles (about \$176 000) in back taxes and penalties. The Committee's leadership described the demands as "an attempt to economically strangle the human rights watchdog" and plans to appeal the decision in court. (Belapan, January 28)

ACTIVIST FINED FOR DEMANDING DISAPPEARANCES INVESTIGATION

On January 26, Judge Natalia Vaitsehovich of the Minsk Tsentralny District Court fined Raman Kazakevich, a Zubr activist, for allegedly violating Art. 167 of the Belarusian Administrative Offenses Code (participation in mass actions violating public order), reported the movement's website. On January 23, Kazakevich, along with six other Zubr members was arrested for holding an unauthorized picket outside the Prosecutor's General office in Minsk (see Belarus Update, Vol. 7, No. 4). The protesters demanded a thorough investigation of the disappearances. (Zubr, January 26)

LOCAL ACTIVIST DETAINED FOR DISTRIBUTING OPPOSITION LEAFLETS

On January 25, Aleksandr Silitsky, an 18-year-old Zubr activist, was detained in the town of Smolevichi, the Minsk Region, for distributing opposition leaflets *Nashe Vremya [Our Time]*. The police confiscated all copies. (Zubr, January 26)

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS HOLD FORUM

On January 23-24, more than 100 human-rights activists from Belarus, Poland, Ukraine, Moldova, Czech Republic, and Russia gathered in Belarus, at the first Human Rights Forum. Many international NGOs, including the International League for Human Rights, as well as representatives of the Council of Europe, OSCE, European Union, United Nations and an impressive number of foreign diplomats attended to support the initiative. The event was organized by the Viasna Human Rights Center, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Human Rights Center, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, and the Legal Aid Society with the assistance from the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). In an attempt to block the forum, the Belarusian authorities forced the hotel administration to cancel the reservation; the organizers had to look for a new venue and to keep it secret. (Viasna, January 29)

UN CEDAW CONCERNS ABOUT WOMEN RIGHTS IN BELARUS

On January 26, Aleh Ivanou, deputy Permanent Representative of Belarus to the United Nations, told the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) that in the past decade the Belarusian leadership has done a great deal to protect women rights, reported M2 PRESSWIRE. According to Ivanou, a new civil code, family and matrimonial regulations, and a new labor code have been adopted. The Belarusian official has admitted, however, that nearly 30 percent of the Belarusian women are regularly abused by their spouses, and about 12 percent are sexually harassed at work. More than 12 percent of women are employed in facilities that do not meet sanitary or health standards. While commending the legislative reforms, the Committee experts expressed concern that marriage preservation with focus on women's reproductive and social responsibilities takes priority over women's right in Belarus. Another issue of concern for the CEDAW was the Lukashenko government's treatment of NGOs that deal with women's issues. (M2, January 26)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

LARGEST INDEPENDENT DAILY FACES ANOTHER LIBEL SUIT

On January 15, the Alliance Media, publisher of *Obozrevatel*, a pro-Lukashenko weekly, and Syarhei Atroshchanka, a famous Belarusian manufacturer of women's underwear and *Obozrevatel's* editor-in-chief, initiated libel proceedings against *Narodnaya Volya*, largest independent daily, reported the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). The action was in response to two articles published in *Narodnaya Volya* this past fall. The first article, published

on September 3, 2003, analyzed the conflict between *Obozrevatel*'s editorial board and Leanid Levin, famous Belarusian architect and the president of the Belarusian Union of Jewish Communities. In a second article titled "What Businesses Are Doing Well in Belarus?" which was published on November 26, 2003, Maryna Koktysh cited comments made by a number of local economists who believe that Atroshchanka's business success was primarily attributed to his ties with the Lukashenko administration. If *Narodnaya Volya* loses, it may end up paying 50 million Belarusian rubles (US \$23,500) in libel damages to both, the Alliance Media and Atroshchanka.

Earlier this year, the National Intellectual Property Center (NIPC), the Belarus's Copyright Office, permitted Atroshchanka to register a new newspaper with the title *Narodnaya Volya* (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No.2). Atroshchanka has already filed a copyright infringement complaint with a prosecutor's office demanding that Iosif Syaredzich, *Narodnaya Volya*'s founder and editor-in-chief, stop publishing his newspaper or change its name. Syaredzich has appealed the NIPC's decision. He believes that Atroshchanka is trying to retaliate against *Narodnaya Volya*, which once referred to *Obozrevatel* as a "tendentious tabloid." On November 17, 2003, the Minsk City Court ordered *Narodnaya Volya* to pay 50 million Belarusian rubles (US \$23,500) in libel damages to Yegor Rybakov, head of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (BRT) (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 6). (BAJ, January 28)

PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE CONFISCATES OPPOSITION BULLETIN

On January 23, the Prosecutor-General's Office ordered mail interception of all copies of the January edition of *Asambleya [the Assembly]*, an unregistered bulletin published by the Assembly of the Belarusian Democratic NGOs, reported Belapan. The bulletin, which since 1997 has been the only periodical in Belarus to cover the activities of democratic NGOs, was distributed to its subscribers by regular mail, Yuri Chausau, *Asambleya*'s staff member, told Belapan. "By seizing the bulletin's copies, the authorities violated the secrecy of private correspondence," he added. The January edition featured analytical articles about the possible involvement of NGOs in forthcoming parliamentary election, and contained a list of judges, the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Justice Ministry's officials deemed personally responsible for the ongoing crackdown on NGOs. The Justice Ministry has repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with the bulletin. (Belapan, January 24)

JOURNALIST RECEIVES ANOTHER HEAVY FINE

On January 29, the Minsk Frunzensky District Court fined journalist Aksana Novikava 3.5 million Belarusian rubles (\$1,600) for allegedly violating Art. 167 of the Belarusian Administrative Offenses Code, reported Viasna Human Rights Center. On December 11, Novikava held an unauthorized picket in front of the Belarusian Supreme Court building in Minsk. On January 16, Novikava was fined 4.37 million Belarusian rubles (\$2,000) for protesting against a possible constitutional referendum that would allow Lukashenko to run again for the Belarusian presidency (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 6, Vol. 7, Nos. 3, 4). (Viasna, January 29)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

KRISHNA FOLLOWERS DETAINED, DENIED REGISTRATION

The authorities continue to detain and warn members of the Community of Krishna Conscience in Belarus for distributing religious material without permission, reported Forum 18 News Service, a religious freedom watchdog based in Oslo, Norway. The Community appealed to the UN Human Rights Committee to investigate the legality of the regime's refusal to register its local branches. Recently, the Brest Region Department denied a registration application filed by the local Krishna followers. (Forum 18, January 27)

LOCAL AUTHORITIES THREATEN TO SUE JEWISH LEADER

Mozyrsky Kamunalnik, a state-run utility company in the city of Mozyr, the Gomel Region, gave Yakau Hutman, president of the World Association of Belarusian Jews (WABJ), until February 10, 2004, to repay 212,238 Belarusian rubles (about \$100) to compensate the cost of dismantling a memorial plaque put up by the WABJ without official permission. The plaque honored Hutman's grandfather, Nisei, and other Mozyr Jews who perished during World War II. This past January, Hutman held two unauthorized pickets outside the presidential administration in Minsk, demanding to stop the dissemination of anti-Semitic literature and the demolition of synagogues, Jewish cemeteries and Holocaust victims memorials in Belarus (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, Nos. 3, 4). (Belapan, January 27)

JEWISH CEMETERY USED AS DUMP

Local residents use a 400-year-old Jewish cemetery in the township of Chernikov, in the Mogilev Region, as a garbage dump and a place to graze cattle and other animals, reported *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)*, an independent newspaper. Several years ago, local authorities removed the fence surrounding the cemetery grounds; since that time residents have turned it into a garbage dump. The town's small Jewish community has complained several times to the authorities. Officials promise to do something, but, citing money problems, have so far done nothing to protect the cemetery. (BDG, January 27)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

US EMBASSY IN MINSK RECEIVES BOMB THREAT

On January 26, an unidentified caller threatened to set off an explosive device in the vicinity of the US Embassy in Minsk, reported Charter 97. A fruitless search for the device ensued. The Minsk Tsentralny District Internal Affairs Directorate is currently looking for the prankster. [In September 2001, a homemade device exploded around 100 feet outside a Minsk building hosting

the USIS, but caused neither injuries nor serious material damage (see Belarus Update, Vol. 4, No.37) - Ed.] (Charter 97, January 27)

IMF MISSION ARRIVES IN BELARUS

On January 26, an International Monetary Fund mission arrived in Belarus to carry out its annual two-week monitoring of the country's economic policy, reported Interfax. Led by Thomas Richardson, IMF European II Department's North-Eastern division deputy chief, the mission will hold consultations with the Belarusian National Bank and other officials. (Interfax, January 27)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

RUSSIA AGREES TO EXTEND GAS SUPPLIES TO BELARUS

On January 29, Aleksander Lukashenko sought to downplay controversy over Russia's threat to cut natural gas shipments to Belarus, a move that would bring the struggling Belarusian economy to a halt, reported Belapan. "Our relations are normal," Lukashenko said in a televised interview. "These are just routine business issues, but the companies' officials are trying to engage the presidents to solve them," he added. Last week, two Russian gas companies, ITERA Holding and Trans Nafta, threatened to stop supplying gas to Belarus at Russia's domestic price which is just a fraction of the world's price. The two companies later agreed to temporarily resume the supplies, pending talks on a new contract that envisions higher tariffs. Russia's state-connected natural gas giant, Gazprom, which previously was the sole gas supplier to Belarus, however has refused to resume supplies it halted as of January 1, 2004. Itar-Tass reported on January 29 that the Russian companies had agreed to continue shipments through February 2004. The local observers believe that the gas dispute seems focused on Russia's push for control over Beltransgaz, Belarus' gas pipeline operator that carries Russian gas to Western markets. (Belapan, Itar-Tass, January 29)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

SADDAM REWARDED HIS SUPPORTERS WITH OIL

Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein rewarded 200 of his leading supporters abroad by giving them millions of barrels of crude oil, reported Agency France Press. On January 25, Al-Mada, a Baghdad-based newspaper, published a list of oil contracts ratified by the Iraqi State Oil Marketing Organization in 1998, which included the names of around 200 heads of states, high profile politicians, and religious figures across four continents, including the Belarusian president. Abdul Sahib Salman Qotob, Oil Ministry Undersecretary, told AFP that his ministry was building a legal case with the help of Interpol to recover money allegedly made by figures cashing in millions of barrels of crude oil they had received for free. (AFP, January 25)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES—

“Some politicians are currently seeking to harness religion to further their political objectives in the run-up to the parliamentary election,” Aleksandr Lukashenko, at a January 22 meeting with a group of Belarusian scholars. (Belapan, January 23)

-- UPCOMING EVENTS --

February 1-4 - The World Movement for Democracy to discuss the political situation in Belarus during its Third Assembly in Durban, South Africa;

February 10 - Russia-Belarus Union State Council of Ministers meeting in Moscow, Russia;

February 11 - Putin and Lukashenko to consider draft Russia-Belarus Union State Constitution and the introduction of the Russian ruble in Belarus at a Supreme State Council meeting, in Moscow.

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. Letters to the Editor: vcole@ilhr.org, subscription services and back issues: 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 Lukashenko's wholesale assault on human rights and the rule of law in Belarus.
