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--HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

ACTIVIST RECEIVES HEAVY FINE

On February 5, Uladzimir Pleshchanka, an activist of the Vitebsk branch of the Belarusian Popular Front Conservative Christian Party (KKhP BNF), conservative wing of the Belarusian Popular Front (BNF), was detained, while collecting signatures under an appeal demanding the repeal of the Russia-Belarus Union Treaty, reported Viasna Human Rights Center. The activist was charged with organizing an unauthorized picket. Judge Svyatlana Varatynskaya of the Vitebsk Chyhunachny District Court found him guilty and fined him 2,800,000 Belarusian rubles (US \$1,300). (Viasna, February 9)

NGO FOUNDER FINED

On February 2, the Gomel Tsentralny District Court fined Artsyom Buryla, a founder of Hart, a Gomel-based youth center, 875,000 Belarusian rubles (US \$406) for allegedly violating Art. 193 of the Belarusian Administrative Offences Code (failure to declare printed materials transported through the Belarusian borders), reported Viasna Human Rights Center. After searching Buryla's car, the Belarusian custom officials confiscated several thousand copies of opposition leaflets urging people to boycott any constitutional referendum on the extension of Lukashenko's term in office. (Viasna, February 9)

MINSK AUTHORITIES BAN VALENTINE'S DAY RALLY

Faced with mounting public protests, the regime continues to curtail the rights of assembly, which is guaranteed by Art. 40 of the Belarusian Constitution. The Minsk City Council denied a Malady Front's request to hold the eighth Valentine's Day rally in the Belarusian capital, arguing that it would threaten public safety, reported Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Belarusian Service. With demonstrations remaining the major vehicle for public expression against government policies, the young opposition members decided to go on with the protest called "We Love Europe! We Love Belarus!" The activists plan to visit foreign embassies and give out Valentine cards. (RFE/RL, February 11)

SENATOR CAMPBELL: BELARUS' HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD WORST IN EUROPE

On February 11, Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO), co-chair of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the US. Congress Helsinki Commission), urged his colleagues to support the adoption of the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act, reported Charter 97. Sen. Campbell stressed that "the situation in Belarus continues its downward spiral with daily reports of growing repression and new human rights violations." "In the last year, Belarusian dictator Lukashenko's assault on civil society has steadily intensified, with the liquidation of NGOs, violence against opposition activists, and repression of the independent media and trade unions," Sen. Campbell said. "It is important for us to stay the course and support Belarus in becoming a genuine European state, in which respect for human rights and democracy is the norm and in which the long-suffering Belarusian people are able to overcome the legacy of dictatorship -- past and present," the Senator said. The full text of his statement can be found at <http://www.charter97.org/eng/news/> (Charter 97, February 11)

BELARUS REMAINS ON EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S AGENDA

On February 10, the European Parliament confirmed that Belarus remains on its "priority list," along with 29 other countries and regions where human rights are flagrantly violated, including China, North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, Colombia, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, and Sudan. (Europe Information Service, February 11)

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

INDEPENDENT DAILY SUSPENDED FOR THREE MONTHS

On February 11, the Information Ministry suspended for three months publishing of *Vyacherny Stolin*, an independent daily published in the city of Stolin, the Brest Region, on the pretext that Alyaksandr Ihnatsyuk, daily's editor-in-chief, failed to notify the Ministry about latest changes in the newspaper's focus from entertainment and business to the current political situation, reported Belapan. In addition, the editor was warned that the advertisements should not occupy more than 30 per cent of the available space. In December 2003, the Stolin District Court fined Ihnatsyuk 495,000 Belarusian rubles (US \$225) for allegedly insulting Uladzimir Pashkevich, a former chair of the Stolin City Executive Committee, under Art. 369 of the Belarusian Criminal Code (see Belarus Update Vol. 7. No. 1). [Under the current law, the Information Ministry may suspend the publication of periodicals or newspapers for up to 3 months without a court ruling. – Ed.] (Belapan, February 11)

ANOTHER INDEPENDENT DAILY TO LOSE TV LISTINGS

Following the October 27, 2003, decision of the Lukashenko Administration, which granted BelTA, state-run information agency, all rights to distribute national TV listings, *Vitebsky Kuryer [Vitebsk Courier]*, an independent daily, was asked to pay 5,000,025 Belarusian rubles (US \$2,340) for a license to reprint the guide, reported the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). Prior to the decision, the newspaper only had to pay 100,000 Belarusian rubles (US \$45). If the newspaper's editorial board agrees to pay such exorbitant amount of money, it will have to raise the price per issue to 1,000 Belarusian rubles, which will make it too expensive for many impoverished Belarusians to purchase the newspaper. "One more time the authorities show the poor Belarusians what they must listen, watch, and read," the editorial board wrote in its appeal to the readers. (BAJ, February 9)

HACKERS ATTACK OPPOSITION WEBSITE

The Lukashenko regime pursues all avenues to silence the independent media, reported Charter 97. For the past 30 days, Charter 97's website was attacked at least twice by computer hackers, who managed to shut the site down for two days. Charter 97 activists believe that the attack was instigated by the authorities. (Charter 97, February 11)

SUSPENDED WEEKLY GOES WWW

On February 9, the editorial board of *Zgoda [The Concord]*, a Minsk-based independent weekly with a circulation of 3,000 copies, announced that following the Information Ministry's order to suspend *Zgoda's* publishing for one month (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 6), it decided to post all articles on the newspaper's web site www.zgoda-weekly.org. (Charter 97, February 9)

PUBLISHING HOUSES ORDERED TO RE-LICENSE

The Belarusian government continues its suppression of freedom to receive, retain, and disseminate information, reported the BBC. The Belarusian State TV informed on February 9 that in order to be eligible to publish books, newspapers, magazines, textbooks, booklets, postcards and other printed matter, all publishing houses should apply for a new license before March 1, 2004. The Belarusian Information Ministry will charge US \$12 to process an application submitted before the deadline and US \$100 for late submissions. (BBC, February 9)

SMALL VICTORY FOR INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

On February 4, Judge Alla Kindra of the Smorgon District Court, the Grodno Region, ruled that the detention of four distributors of *Mestnaya Gazeta*, [*The Local Newspaper*], an independent newspaper, coupled with the confiscation all copies and some cash by the local tax inspectors on January 15-16, 2004 (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 4), was illegal, reported the BAJ. AT the hearing, it has transpired that all distributors were proper licensed to sell the newspaper. The court also found a number of glaring inconsistencies in the tax inspectors' reports. (BAJ, February 9)

--ELECTION 2004--

SENATOR McCAIN: BELARUS IS RIPE FOR CHANGE

On February 6, addressing an international conference titled "The Future of Democracy Beyond the Baltics" held in Riga, Latvia (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 7), U.S. Senator John McCain (R-AZ), commended the members of the Five+ coalition, 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, for its efforts to bring together Belarus' leading democratic forces and for producing a single list of candidates nearly nine months before the upcoming 2004 election, reported U.S. Embassy in Minsk. "We in the West have a moral obligation to support your campaign to end Lukashenko's dictatorship," Sen. McCain said. "I believe the Atlantic democracies must provide sustained support and encouragement to the Belarusian opposition to prepare you for the task of governing after Lukashenko," he added.

Sen. McCain called on the American government and the European international community to "pursue concerted efforts to help build the institutions of a free Belarus - civic organizations, independent media, strong political parties, and other pillars of a democratic society - to create political space not under the regime's control." The Senator encouraged a new approach to Minsk through Moscow, "where President Putin's creeping coup against democratic opposition and media freedom is all the more reason for the West to encourage democratic change in Belarus, so that Lukashenko's autocratic rule does not tempt Russia along the same dangerous path." The full text of the speech can be found at <http://www.usembassy.lv/EN/current/mccain>

At Sen. McCain's invitation, a delegation of the Belarusian opposition arrived to the U.S. on February 9 to discuss this year's parliamentary election, the 2004 Belarus Democracy Act pending in the U.S. Congress, and the Russia-Belarus Union. (RFE/RL, February 11)

OPPOSITION, UNITE!

"There is little doubt but that Mr. Lukashenko will do whatever he must in order for his followers to 'win' the parliamentary elections," wrote Tod Lindbergh, the editor of Policy Review magazine and a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, in an article titled "Democratic Dreams" published in The Washington Times on February 10. "The key point is that with a united opposition, he will have to be much more blatant in doing so, and this in turn will expose him to local and international pressure." (The Washington Times, February 10)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

JEWISH LEADER FINED

The Minsk Tsentralny District Court fined Yakau Hutman, president of the World Association of Belarusian Jews (WABJ), a New York-based NGO, 350,000 Belarusian rubles (US\$163) for acting on behalf of an unregistered association, reported Belapan. In an interview to Belapan Hutman, an American citizen, said that on August 14 and September 5, 2003, he sent two letters to the Belarusian authorities demanding to stop the dissemination of anti-Semitic literature and the demolition Jewish memorials in Belarus. On February 6, Hutman received the letter dated December 12, 2003, and signed by Judge Natalia Vaitsehovich of the Minsk Tsentralny District Court informing him that he has to pay a fine. This past January, Hutman held two unauthorized pickets outside the presidential administration in Minsk (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, Nos. 3, 4).

According to Belapan, the Malady Front plans a series of opposition rallies titled "Days of Struggle Against State-Sponsored Anti-Semitism In Belarus." The activists will lay flowers at the sites of demolished synagogues, Jewish cemeteries and monuments to Holocaust victims. (Belapan, February 9-11)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

DIPLOMATS CONCERNED OVER SITUATION WITH NON-STATE UNIVERSITY

At a January 23 meeting with Aleksandr Radkov, Belarusian Education Minister, U.S. Ambassador George Krol and other diplomats expressed concern about the future of the European Humanities University (EHU), a Minsk-based independent educational institution, reported the U.S. Embassy in Minsk. On December 4, 2003, at the Education Ministry board meeting, Radkov alleged that EHU uses too many visiting professors from abroad, thereby lowering educational standards. According to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, on January 21, Radkov urged Prof. Anatoly Mikhailov, EHU President, to resign. At the meeting

with Radkov, the foreign diplomats noted that EHU is regarded as a symbol of Belarus's attempt to be open and cooperate with Western countries and that Prof. Mikhailov can indeed assure the independence of the university. (U.S. Embassy, IWPR, January 30 - February 12)

LUKASHENKO ORDERS TO INCREASE PROPAGANDA

Ideology in Belarus remains the government's main priority and "is not subject to privatization," reiterated Aleksander Lukashenko at the February 10 meeting with his ministers, reported Belapan. The Belarusian leader demanded that "extreme measures" be taken to ensure the country's "political stability." He once again accused "foreign sponsors" of helping Belarusian opposition to "create and impose on people various myths aimed at weakening Belarusian statehood and undermining socio-economic stability." "One of our primary objectives is to conduct ideological work in such effective and systematic way that it will reach every citizen," the Belarusian strongman said. (Belapan, February 10)

BRT HEAD FALLS OUT OF FAVOR

On February 13, the Belarusian strongman fired Yegor Rybakov, head of the Belarusian State Television and Radio Company (BRT), reported the Belarusian president's website. Rybakov has gained notoriety by pressing libel charges against independent media, including the November 17, 2003, 50 million Belarusian rubles (US \$23,500) judgment against *Narodnaya Volya*, the largest independent daily. Officially, the BRT head was fired as a result of the "thorough investigation" conducted by the Prosecutor General office, which uncovered "a number of violations." Local observers believe, however, that the main reason for the dismissal was Lukashenko's desire to strengthen the state control over the mass media ahead of the parliamentary election. (see Belarus Update, Vol. 6, No. 6) (www.president.by, February 13)

LUKASHENKO'S AIDE ARRESTED

On February 11, Galina Zhuravkova, chief of the Presidential Administration Property Management Department, was arrested and jailed on charges of corruption under Art. 108 of the Belarusian Criminal Code, Aleksander Bazanov, State Security Committee's spokesman told journalists in Minsk. Bazanov said the Belarusian KGB had been investigating individuals working in the department. "Since several of these individuals have been accused of embezzling government funds, Zhuravkova may be responsible for the illegal actions of her subordinates," he added.

Local observers believe that Lukashenko knew all along about the alleged wrongdoings in his own Property Management Department, which is one of the country's largest businesses with multiple subsidiaries and an estimated annual revenues over US \$1,000,000,000. With the parliamentary election looming on the horizon, the Belarusian strongman wants to remind his entourage who is the boss in order to make it more subservient and cooperative. On February 11,

Lukashenko also called on the State Control Committee to ensure tougher punishment for tax evasion and corruption crimes. (Belapan, February 11)

MARKET VENDORS GO ON STRIKE

On February 12, about 20,000 market vendors nationwide stopped working to support their Vitebsk colleagues who 10 days earlier went on a hunger strike, protesting unlawful seizure of their merchandise by the authorities and an increase in taxes and insurance fees (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 6). The strike organizers said that if the government refuses to start negotiations on February 20, they will initiate an indefinite strike on March 1 and will urge the vendors to stop paying taxes. (Belapan, February 12)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

RUSSIA MAY CUT NATURAL GAS SUPPLIES TO BELARUS

On February 12, Sergei Kupriyanov, a Gazprom spokesman, announced that Russia's natural gas monopoly will cut off nearly all supplies to Belarus, reported Interfax, a Russian news service. Kupriyanov said the decision to cut off supplies was prompted by the Belarusian government 's failure to reach a new agreement on gas deliveries with Gazprom. "Belarus continues to insist on a below-market rate but we don't see why Gazprom should provide the subsidy," Aleksander Ryazanov, Gazprom's Vice President, commented. If forced to pay the market prices, Belarus, which is almost totally dependent on Russian gas for its energy supplies, stands to lose several hundred million dollars a year, analysts say. They believe that Gazprom is retaliating for Belarus's refusal to allow Gazprom a controlling stake in Beltransgaz, a Belarusian company controlling the major conduit for Russian gas exports to western Europe. (Interfax, February 12)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

IRANIAN PRESIDENT TO VISIT TO BELARUS

According to Interfax, Mohammad Khatami, Iranian president, accepted an invitation from Aleksandr Lukashenko to visit Belarus this year. Mohammad Hashemi Golpayegani, Iran's ambassador to Belarus, told journalists in Minsk on February 9 that good political relations between the two countries are not yet resulted in the sufficient economic collaboration, (Interfax, February 9)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

"Police is the cornerstone of our security. It is our only hope. Police should be venerated for it represents the law," Aleksandr Lukashenko, speaking at the February 13 Interior Ministry meeting. (www.president.gov, February 13)

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.
