

## INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

### BELARUS UPDATE

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#### --HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPOSITION NEWS --

##### 1. BELARUS HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD REMAINED POOR IN 2003

On February 25, the U.S. State Department released its 28th annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. The Reports provide a snapshot of the human rights record in 196 countries, evaluated under a consistent set of internationally recognized human rights standards and norms. According to the latest Report, the Belarusian government's human rights record remained very poor and worsened in some areas. Authorities continued to deny Belarusian citizens the right to change their government. Credible reports revealing the government's role in politically motivated disappearances have been ignored. Police abuse and occasional torture of prisoners and detainees continued. Security services continued to infringe upon citizens' privacy and freedom of movement by closely monitoring the activities of opposition politicians, human rights organizations, and foreigners. By adopting several new decrees and through the use of libel laws, the Belarusian government continued to restrict freedom of press and association, including trade

unions' collective bargaining rights. The Belarusian Orthodox Church was favored over other religious groups. The Belarusian Foreign Ministry called the report biased, reported Interfax. Read the full text at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27827.htm> (U.S. State Department, February 25)

## 2. FOUR ZUBR ACTIVISTS ARRESTED IN MINSK

On February 22, about a hundred Zubr activists and Olga Zavadsky, mother of disappeared journalist Dmitry Zavadsky, held a vigil entitled "Chain of People Who Care" on Skaryna Avenue in Minsk, demanding an impartial investigation into the disappearances, reported the movement's website. The unauthorized protest lasted for about 30 minutes. Seven activists were detained; four of them were released immediately after showing their IDs. Timafei Dranchuk, Pavel Yukhnevich, and Ruslan Marazievich were taken to the Leninsky District Internal Affairs Directorate, where police filed a report on them. (Zubr, February 23)

## 3. TWO VITEBSK ACTIVISTS ARRESTED FOR UNAUTHORIZED PICKETING

On February 23, Uladzimir Pleshchanka and Alyaksandr Salauyan, both members of the Vitebsk branch of the Belarusian Popular Front Conservative Christian Party (KKhP BNF), were detained while collecting signatures under an appeal demanding the repeal of the Russia-Belarus Union Treaty, reported RFE/RL. The activists were taken to the Vitebsk Chyhunachny District Internal Affairs Directorate and charged with staging an unauthorized picket. In early February 2004, Judge Svyatlana Varatynskaya of the Vitebsk Court fined Pleshchanka 2,800,000 Belarusian rubles (US \$1,300) for a similar offence (see Belarus Update Vol. 7, No. 7). (RFE/RL, February 24)

## 4. U.S. ASSISTANCE TO BELARUS FOCUSES ON DEMOCRACY

According to the U.S. State Department, Belarus lags significantly behind other European countries in terms of U.S. financial aid. From October 1, 2002 through September 30, 2003, Belarus received approximately \$9.5 million allocated as follows: \$8.9 million for democracy support programs; \$500,000 – humanitarian assistance; \$100,000 – economic and social reforms. "Until President Lukashenko remains in power, there is little hope for real political or economic reforms in Belarus," the note says. See the full text at <http://usinfo.state.gov/ruski/>

-- MEDIA FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

## 5. PROSECUTOR-GENERAL GOES AFTER INDEPENDENT DAILY

The Belarusian Prosecutor's General Office has reopened a criminal investigation into the case against *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta (BDG)*, a Minsk-based independent weekly, reported Charter 97. The newspaper is accused of slandering Viktor Sheiman, Belarusian Prosecutor-

General under Article 188 of the Belarusian Criminal Code. About 18 months ago, *BDG's* supplement *Dlya Sluzhebnogo Polzovaniya (For Internal Distribution Only)* published an article by Iryna Khalip, *BDG's* deputy editor-in-chief, entitled "Afghan Hounds." In the article, the journalist revealed the details of the bribery and embezzlement case opened against Viktor Kazeka, a former president of *Beldzyarzhkharchpram*, the Belarusian Food Industry Ministry, and his son, Andrei, former head of the sales department at *Kryshtal (Crystal)*, a vodka factory. Khalip alleged that Viktor Sheiman was directly involved in illegal business activities for the Vodka Mafia. On February 26, the journalist was summoned to the Prosecutor's office for interrogations. (Charter 97, February 26)

-- ELECTION 2004 --

## 6. IDEOLOGY WATCHDOGS ARE BACK

Getting ready for this year parliamentary election, Aleksandr Lukashenko, who believes that ideology in Belarus is the government's sole priority, signed decree No. 111 on restructuring the State Ideology Department, reported Belapan. The decree requires all state institutions and organizations, and state-owned enterprises with more than 150 employees, to set up ideology departments and post a deputy head of the organization or enterprise in charge of ideology. An integral ideological hierarchy will be created with the deputy mayors in charge, who will then report to the first deputy chief of the Lukashenko administration. (Belapan, February 23)

## 7. REGIME GETS READY FOR ELECTION

Continuing its crackdown on independent media and democratic opposition, the Belarusian government introduced a decree which, if adopted, would ban entrepreneurs from publishing newspapers or operating broadcast media. Drafted by the Information Ministry, the decree calls for yet another re-registration of all enterprises engaged in publishing activities. The registration fee is set at \$400 for a publishing company and \$200 for a publication. Those who want to register a new periodical will also have to set up a new corporate entity that would comprise an editorial board. The League notes that following the closure of several high-profile opposition-oriented newspapers, opposition groups have increasingly relied on small publications. The new law will make it even more difficult for the democratic opposition to reach the potential electorate before parliamentary election in the fall. (World Markets Analysis, February 24)

## 8...SO DOES OPPOSITION

On February 23-24, representatives of the Belarusian opposition political parties, NGOs and election blocs gathered in Vilnius to discuss cooperative efforts before the upcoming parliamentary elections, reported Charter 97. The delegates agreed on the joint nomination of opposition representatives to the electoral commissions and on the necessity to coordinate their monitoring activities. "The discussion became a first small step toward the coordination of activities by major opposition political groups," commented Andrei Sankou, Charter 97

international coordinator. He did not rule out the possibility of creating a unified opposition center prior to the elections. (Charter 97, February 26)

-- RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN BELARUS --

#### 9. BAPTIST CHURCHES IN BREST REGION FACE DISSOLUTION

The Brest Region authorities warned unregistered Baptist communities that they have until March 1 to “stop their illegal activities,” reported Forum 18 News Service. A circular from the Justice Ministry distributed in December 2003 called for local officials and the police to “immediately halt all religious activity of unregistered religious groups.” (Forum 18, February 26)

#### 10. LUKASHENKO CONGRATULATES RUSSIAN PATRIARCH

On February 23, Aleksandr Lukashenko congratulated Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Alexy II on his 75th anniversary, reported the presidential press service. “Your Holiness is always welcome in Belarus, where everyone respects you,” Lukashenko said in his greetings. He also wished the Russian Patriarch “health and God’s assistance in serving the Church for many years ahead.” (Itar-Tass, February 23)

#### 11. YOUTH GROUP PROTESTS STATE-SPONSORED ANTI-SEMITISM

On February 23, ten Malady Front activists were shortly detained in Minsk for holding an unauthorized picket near the U.S. Embassy, protesting the Lukashenko government’s tolerance for a growing wave of anti-Semitism in the country. The activists demanded police action against those responsible for the desecration of the graves and other anti-Semitic attacks. (Belapan, February 23)

--TRADE UNION NEWS--

#### 12. EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO PROBE TREATMENT OF UNIONS IN BELARUS

On February 26, the European Commission officially opened an investigation into workers’ rights violations in Belarus, reported Belapan. “The Commission has received reports from the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, the European Trade Union Confederation and the World Confederation of Labor about systemic violations of freedom of association in Belarus,” the Commission said in its statement. “The reports indicate that the Belarusian authorities refuse to register free trade unions, limit their activities and harass trade union leaders and activists.” If instances of violations of workers’ rights are confirmed, Belarus might be stripped of tariff preferences for its exports to the EU. (Belapan, February 26)

### 13. CONGRESS OF DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNIONS LOSES ITS LEASE

Belarusian authorities continue to suppress independent trade unions, reported Charter 97. The Presidential administration's property department refused to extend a lease of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions. The Congress considers the decision a gross political provocation undertaken a few days before the visit to Belarus of the representatives of the International Labor Organization and the European Union. (Charter 97, February 23)

### 14.... AND URGES REGIME TO RESPECT FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

On February 26, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions condemned the Belarusian authorities for severely restricting the freedom of expression, guaranteed by the International Covenant on Political and Civic Rights ratified by Belarus, reported Belapan. Citing police and judicial abuse of protesters, the Congress pointed out that judges "do not bother themselves with formalities, sentencing activists to administrative arrests or ordering exorbitant fines." The Congress's leadership intends to submit a request to hold a rally in downtown Minsk to protest the regime's anti-social policies. (Belapan, February 26)

### 15. STRIKING COMMITTEE HEAD CHARGED

On February 20, the Grodno Leninsky District Internal Affairs Directorate charged Valery Levonevski, head of the Belarusian entrepreneurial striking committee, with "activities on behalf of an unregistered organization." Earlier this year, law-enforcement agencies obtained a copy of Levonevski's letter to Western diplomats accredited in Minsk. In the letter, the entrepreneur commented on the political situation in the country. (Charter 97, February 23)

-- AT HOME IN BELARUS --

### 16. INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY STILL IN PERIL

As we reported, at the December 4, 2003 Education Ministry meeting, Aleksandr Radkov, Education Minister, called for resignation of Prof. Anatoly Mikhailov, President of the European Humanities University (EHU), a Minsk-based independent educational institution (see Belarus Update, Vol. 7, No. 7). According to the February 17 letter distributed by Alexander Mikheyshin, Mikhailov's aide, at the February 9 meeting between Prof. Mikhailov and Radkov, the EHU President declined to step down. (EHU, February 16)

-- BROTHER SLAVS --

### 17. LUKASHENKO: HANDS OFF OUR FRIENDSHIP

On February 23, in an attempt to mitigate harsh remarks about Russia's decision to considerably raise prices for its natural gas supplies, Lukashenko said he does not consider the issue a political one. He described the attempts by the media to exaggerate the problems in Russian-Belarusian relations as inadmissible. "A Russian person would give the shirt off his back to a Belarusian in need and the other way round," the Belarusian leader said. He warned that he would not "allow anybody to incite ethnic hatred" in Belarus. He also called on his government not to give in "to provocations by opposition politicians, who are trying to use the conflict to their own advantage." (RIA news agency, February 23)

-- INTERNATIONAL NEWS --

#### 18. U.N. WARNS HIV RAMPAGING THROUGH EASTERN EUROPE

On February 22, Peter Piot, the executive director of the UN AIDS organization, said that Eastern Europe and Central Asia are experiencing the fastest-growing HIV epidemic in the world, reported The Associated Press. In 1998, Piot noted there were only 30,000 people known to be infected with HIV in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. That figure has since risen to 1.5 million, he said. Worst off are Russia, Ukraine and soon-to-be EU members Estonia and Latvia. [The UN Development Program said last week that one of every 100 adults in Russia, Ukraine and Estonia carries HIV. -Ed.]. HIV continues to spread in Belarus, Moldova and Kazakhstan, and "epidemics are now evident in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan," according to a UN report. The World Bank reported last fall that efforts to curb HIV/AIDS in the region are too small to have any effect, adding that prevention and care programs require a significant increase in funding. (The Associated Press, February 23)

#### 19. WORLD BANK TO REVISE COOPERATION WITH BELARUS

On February 26, Luca Barbone, the World Bank's country director for Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, announced that the World Bank will need to revise its cooperation plan with Belarus following Minsk's decision to cancel loans for its AIDS and tuberculosis aid programs, reported Interfax, a Russian news agency. The Bank was ready to loan Belarus \$28.8 million and help attract sponsors for the programs. Belarus backpedaled on its plans citing some improvement [sic!] in the situation regarding AIDS and tuberculosis. Barbone said that contrary to the Belarusian government's assertions, the World Bank statistics did not indicate any improvement. (Interfax, February 26)

-- NOTABLE QUOTES--

"Our armed forces, troops and all law-enforcement agencies have been and will remain the most important component of Belarus's intellectual, ideological, political and cultural potential," Aleksandr Lukashenko, during a reception for the Belarusian military on the occasion of the Motherland Defenders Day. (BBC, February 23)

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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](http://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](mailto:vcole@ilhr.org), subscription services and back issues: [otarasov@ilhr.org](mailto: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.

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