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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus – Outpost of Tyranny

Statement by Helsinki Commission Chairman Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) in Senate

Mr. President, over the course of the last few months, we have witnessed dramatic events in one of Europe's largest countries, Ukraine. The Orange Revolution has clearly shown that people power can bring about peaceful democratic change some thought was not possible in a former Soviet state. As a result, and with the support of the United States, Europe and international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe OSCE, Ukraine is on the path to freedom and democracy. Notwithstanding the formidable challenges that remain to overcome the legacy of the past, Ukraine now has a real chance at consolidating its democracy and further integrating into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Unfortunately, the news out of Belarus, Ukraine's neighboring fellow eastern Slavic country to the north stands in stark contrast to the encouraging news coming out of Ukraine. Secretary Rice, in her confirmation testimony, characterized Belarus, along with North Korea, Iran, Cuba, Burma, and Zimbabwe as an outpost of tyranny and asserted that America stands with oppressed people on every continent. Belarus, under Alexander Lukashenka's now 10-year repressive rule, has the worst human rights record of any country in Europe. Lukashenka's regime has increasingly violated human rights and freedoms and has made a mockery of commitments that Belarus freely undertook when it joined the OSCE in 1992.

Nothing has changed for the better since last October's fundamentally flawed parliamentary elections and rigged referendum allowing Lukashenka unlimited terms as president. In November, Lukashenka appointed Viktor Sheiman as head of the powerful Presidential Administration, despite credible evidence linking Sheiman to the disappearances of opposition leaders and a journalist in 1999 and 2000.

The harassment and persecution of civil society has intensified. A top opposition figure, Mikhail Marinich, was sentenced in late December on the charge of stealing, of all things, U.S. government property--in this case, computers--despite the fact that the U.S. Embassy in Minsk makes no claims against Marinich. Clearly, Lukashenka wants to eliminate Marinich as a potential candidate for the 2006 presidential elections.

Other opposition leaders--Valery Levaneuski and Alyaksandr Vasilyeu--continue to serve terms in a minimum security colony after having been found guilty of "public slander" of the Belarusian leader. Their crime? Distributing leaflets urging people to take part in an unauthorized rally. The leaflets contained a satirical poem about Lukashenka. Another example of Belarus' reluctance to promote human rights is the recent refusal to grant a visa to former OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Chairman and Romanian Foreign Minister Adrian Severin, who now serves as the UN Human Rights Commission's Special Rapporteur on Belarus. The Belarusian regime has also clamped down on independent NGOs and prodemocracy political parties with Kafkaesque legal requirements and has mounted a full-fledged assault on independent trade unions. Problems are being experienced by religious communities attempting to operate freely.

As Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, charged with monitoring and encouraging compliance by all 55 participating States with OSCE agreements, I call upon the Belarusian authorities to live up to their freely-undertaken commitments with respect to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Last October, President Bush signed into law the Belarus Democracy Act, which had been introduced in the Senate by then Helsinki Commission Chairman Senator Campbell and in the House by commission co-chair *Chris Smith*, stating:

We welcome this legislation as a means to bolster friends of freedom and to nurture the growth of democratic values, habits, and institutions within Belarus. The fate of Belarus will rest not with a dictator, but with the students, trade unionists, civic and religious leaders, journalists, and all citizens of Belarus claiming freedom for their nation.

It is essential that we in the Congress, together with the administration and the OSCE, keep faith with the courageous people of Belarus struggling to ensure freedom and democratic values for their long-suffering country.

Source: Charter97; March 9, 2005; www,charter97.org

2. Museum to Commemorate Nazi Victims Created in Belarus

Two old and shabby railway cars with windows covered with barbed wire will become the main exhibits of the museum to commemorate Nazi victims, which is being created in Minsk as part of the activities on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Victory.

Those are the same railway cars, which were used by the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War to transport hundreds of thousands of people to the West, where they were to become slaves, or to be exterminated. The Nazis transported West 399,374 people, including 33,000 children, from Belarus alone, representatives of the Belarusian republican foundation "Mutual Understanding and Reconciliation" told Itar-Tass. The museum is being created on the initiative of the foundation.

Activists of the foundation managed to find for the museum authentic belongings of prisoners of concentration camps, as well as documents and photos, including from German archives, which feature victims of Nazism. War-time documentaries are planned to be shown to visitors of the museum during excursions.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 9, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

3. Central Street in Grodno Blocked by Striking Belarus Businessmen

Most markets did not work on Thursday in Belarus in line with the national strike of businessmen. Street marches and unauthorized rallies were staged in several cities. Around 1,000 businessmen in Grodno sealed off the central street in the city. Minsk businessmen also joined the protest action. Small businessmen protest against a new principle of levying added-value tax (AVT) in mutual trade between Russia and Belarus.

Businessmen whose main activities lie in peddling goods between Belarus and Russia, were unready to switch over from January 1, 2005 to trade with Russia under a new principle of paying the AVT – by the country of designation.

Apart from a combined tax (150 US dollars a month), they are now to pay an 18-percent AVT on Russian goods. Representatives of small business demand a meeting with the president and a repeal of the AVT. At the same time, they spurned down the government's proposal to set up a conciliatory commission to simplify the mechanism of paying the AVT and to establish wholesale markets of Russian goods.

Businessmen have been striking since March 1 and stated that they intend to continue the job action till March 25.

The presidential press service told Tass on Thursday that Alexander Lukashenko plans to visit several industrial goods markets and shopping centers over the next few days and to study the problem in detail.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 4, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

4. Belarus Working on Armament Program for Armed Forces

Belarus will soon adopt an armament program for its armed forces, a senior general said on Thursday.

"This program involves the possibility of primarily developing basic military technologies and dual use technologies based on the domestic military industrial complex," Maj. Gen. Yury Portnov, deputy chief for research of the armed forces general staff, told Interfax.

He said the program would enable Belarus to speed up the development of individual kinds of armaments and to ultimately come up with systems no worse than their top foreign counterparts.

Source: Interfax; March 3, 2004; www.interfax.com

5. Belarusian Court Punishes Sex Traders

A district court in Minsk in February sentenced Uladzimir Isachenka to 15 years in prison, finding him guilty of running a sex-trade ring and receiving \$79,000 for luring 168 Belarusian women into sex slavery in foreign countries, Belapan reported on 3 March, citing the Prosecutor-General's

Office. Additionally, the court sentenced to eight years in prison each Isachenka's wife for helping her husband and a former official of the Culture Ministry for forging documents to obtain Italian visas for recruited women. The court also ordered the confiscation of property belonging to the three convicts. JM

Source: RFE/RL; March 4, 2005; www.rferl.org

REGIONAL

6. Trade Frets in Minsk as Russia Nears WTO

Belarusian authorities want to speed the process of joining the World Trade Organization - and to enter the club alongside Russia, *Vremya Novostei* daily reported today.

Ahead of imminent talks in a working group on accession, ambassador to Moscow Vladimir Grigoryev was reported as saying officials in capital Minsk feared Russia's neighbor state being isolated as the only regional power left out of the trading bloc.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has already aired concerns about Moscow pushing ahead with active talks on accession without consulting Minsk - just as post-election "orange" Ukraine threatened Russia with joining the WTO first, and dictate the basis of a changed trading relationship.

If Belarus fell behind, problems could loom in trade with Russia, said a source close to negotiations. "Minsk wanted Moscow to become a force to pave the way to the WTO for Belarus during talks on the issue with WTO members. Recent developments showed Russia's position diverging, though Minsk still hopes," the insider said.

In talks with the trade group, Minsk is said to have gained ground on several issues, notably over agriculture. Forecasts of further progress are considered hasty, though, observers say, since a series of hurdles can be jumped only through amendments to existing law. Unlike Russia, Belarus has no specific accords with members of the working group charting the course ahead. Misunderstandings about liberalizing the financial sector are said still to exist.

Politics influence Belarus talks. Given United States membership of the working group - and relations between the two nations distinctly cool - negotiations could drag on. The European Union, another member of the working group, has also been criticizing Minsk in more strident terms, though Belarusian authorities rate it easier to compromise with Brussels than Washington.

Securing market economy status requires lifting antidumping procedures. Yesterday, Belarus again came to close quarters with the U.S., over human rights. At a news briefing in Minsk, foreign ministry spokesman Ruslan Erin noted that a country report on human rights practices from the U.S. State Department was prejudiced and predetermined by policies in Washington. "The U.S. still sticks to the strategy of voicing prejudiced estimations of human rights practices in Belarus," Erin said. Washington ignored success in fighting human trafficking, high educational standards and young people's rights.

The State Department's annual report on human rights warned yesterday of alarming deterioration of conditions in Belarus, claiming freedom of speech and other liberties were being brutally violated. U.S. State Secretary Condoleezza Rice called Belarus Europe's outpost of tyranny.

In marked contrast, Russia has gained steadily in talks on accession and will join this year after negotiations with 24 of 65 WTO members. This year brings bargaining with major members

including the United States, Canada and Brazil. Russia has almost fully revised its laws on foreign trade and within two years, will ratify international accords needed for entry.

Ukrainian authorities, too, claim WTO doors will open this year. Kiev has signed 30 protocols on accession to goods and services markets. Talks are under way now with the United States, Australia, China, Japan, Ecuador, Columbia, Norway, Salvador and Indonesia. Market status has yet to be acknowledged.

Source: Russia Journal; March 4, 2005; www.russiajournal.com

7. Moldova Deports 46 Belarusians, 100 Russians May Follow

The Moldovan authorities have deported 46 Belarusian observers and intend to extradite another 100 Russians, CIS-EMO (CIS Elections Monitoring Organization) reports in its press release.

According to the CIS-EMO, its 100 observers from Belarus had arrived in Moldova to monitor parliamentary elections. Forty-six of them, including a member of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party and a member of the Belarusian Election Commission, were blocked in the car of the train on Friday for no reason. Subsequently, the decision of the Moldovan authorities to deport these people was announced.

Yet, this was not the end of the conflict. One hundred Russian citizens (mostly from St. Petersburg) are under a threat of deportation, the press release reads.

"Presently, Russian citizens, including women, are in closed unheated carriages at the border rail-way station Bulbak," the press release says.

According to the head of the CIS-EMO mission, before midnight, two carriages with the Russian citizens will be linked to a train bound for St. Petersburg. "In other words, another 100 Russian citizens will be deported," the press release reads.

According to the document, the Russian people to be deported include representatives of municipal assemblies, district election commissions, St. Petersburg branches of the Communist Party and Yabloko.

Viktor Karmatsky, the secretary of the supreme council of CIS-EMO, believes that such actions of the Moldovan authorities came after the preliminary report of the CIS-EMO missions about numerous violations during the elections in Kyrgyzstan.

"Possibly, the Moldovan authorities realized that our observers are professionals and know the ropes well," the press release quotes Mr. Karmatsky as saying.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Karmatsky said that the Moldovan authorities could have no grounds for deporting the observers, because all the documents, including temporary registration, were in order.

According to him, the Moldovan officials referred to some order, though failed to give any more details.

When asked whether the CIS-EMO observers had any invitations from the Moldovan Election Commission, Mr. Karmatsky said there had been an oral agreement.

He also noted that 50 Ukrainian representatives of CIS-EMO had earlier arrived in Moldova to monitor the elections. They were all let in the country, though they had the same documents as the Belarusian and Russian citizens, Mr. Karmatsky stressed.

The press release also reads that CIS-EMO is the only CIS organization accredited to the Moldovan Election Commission.

Source: RiaNovosti; March 5, 2005; www.rian.ru

8. Belarus, Ukraine Interior Ministers to Step up Crime-busting

The Ministers of the Interior of Belarus and Ukraine are to sign a joint statement on refinement of the two countries' interaction in crime-busting efforts, Gennady Klepcha, chief of the Belarusian Interior Ministry's department of information and public relations, has told Itar-Tass.

The Ukrainian delegation has been invited to Minsk to attend the celebrations of the 88th jubilee of the Belarusian Police Corps. Leading officials of the Interior Ministries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Russia, police officers of Armenia and Poland arrive here to participate in the celebrations on March 3 and 4.

The guests are to hold talks with their Belarusian counterparts, lay a wreath at the monument to the personnel of Belarusian law enforcement agencies who died in the performance of their official and military duty, take part in a ceremonial meeting, and attend a number of cultural and sports events.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 4, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

9. Belarusian Authorities Counter Russian Influence

In an interview with *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Sergei Karganov, the chairman of the presidium of the Foreign and Defense Policy Council, says Belarusian state TV and printed media are actively conducting an open anti-Russian propaganda campaign at present. Minsk is cutting all "undesirable" materials from the remaining Russian TV programs and replacing them with local news coverage. In essence, high-quality Russian TV programs are used as a side dish to totalitarian propaganda. Apparently, as if that was not enough, the Belarusian authorities have decided to launch a satellite TV channel, which is supposed to broadcast the Belarusian "truth" to Russian regions.

Despite its greater capabilities, Russia does not have either radio or TV stations that can broadcast programs to Belarusian population with content favoring Russia.

The political influence of Russia in Belarus is also decreasing, even though it seemed to be predominant several years ago. The Russian leadership has expressed its dissatisfaction with the policies conducted by Minsk on several occasions. However, action did not back these words up, and the Belarusian leader has assumed that he can outwit the Kremlin. His arrogant confidence is demoralizing Belarus's political circles, while he has deliberately labeled Russia "a paper tiger."

He uses the idea and the mechanisms of the Union State to cover up his policy toward separation from Russia.

The West has been monitoring the situation for quite a while. Until recently, Western politicians maintained a neutral stance, hoping that Russia could drive Belarus toward reforms and democratization on its own.

Now these hopes are gradually dissipating, and the West wants to deal with Belarus more closely. The US Congress has already adopted, and the US president signed the Belarus

Democracy Act. Traditionally, such acts have been very effective. If in the past the effects were only seen years after their adoption, the timeframe is much shorter today.

Source: *RiaNovosti*; March 5, 2005; www.rian.ru

INTERNATIONAL

10. Belarus Blacklisted

Open Doors, an American missionary organization, published its annual list of the countries in which Christians face the most prosecution.

The list of 50 states is headed by North Korea for the third year in a row. It is followed by Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Laos and Iran. Russia is in 27th place, followed by Tajikistan.

The blacklist also includes Afghanistan (10th place), Yemen (11th), Turkmenistan (12th), Pakistan (13th), Uzbekistan (15th), Egypt (18th), Iraq (21st), Azerbaijan (22nd), Cuba (26th), Qatar (33rd), India (34th), Indonesia (37th), Algeria (38th), Turkey (39th), **Belarus (42nd)**, United Arab Emirates (43rd), Syria (45th), and Jordan (47th). Bahrain rounds out the list at 50th place.

□

According to Jerry Dikstry, an Open Doors representative, the study was based on a large number of factors, in particular, the ability to profess Christianity, the degree of persecution, and freedom of worship.

The research was largely based on information from missionaries and members of churches that faced persecution. □

Representatives of Open Doors note that countries like Saudi Arabia adhere to the Sharia law, which states that conversion from Islam is punishable by death. In Vietnam, representatives of evangelical churches are considered secret enemies of the communist regime and are suspected of ties with the United States.

□

[Translated by the editor]

Source: *BelaPAN*; March 9, 2005; www.naviny.by

11. Why You Should Care About Belarus Freedom

The current backslide from the ideals of freedom and democracy in Russia was a motivating force for last week's meeting in Slovakia between President Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin. What is happening in today's Russia - the curtailment of freedom of speech, stifling of private capital and enterprise, and the pursuit of close economic, political and military ties with "rogue countries" of the Arab world - was inconceivable at the dawn of glasnost (outspokenness) and perestroika (reconstruction) in the early '90s.

What has made Russia, since then, decide to turn against the civilized world all over again? One answer to this question can be found in a small state wedged between Russia and Poland called Belarus.

"A boil in the center of Europe" is how Belarus was described recently by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The reason for such harsh language is the odious leader of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, who can easily qualify as Putin's teacher. The path Russia has veered toward lately is the same direction Lukashenko has taken since assuming power in 1994 - toward

dictatorship, away from freedom. This is troublesome, given the still-influential position of Russia on the international stage.

Lukashenko's first step upon assuming power was to cut the state constitution "to size" and dismiss the popularly elected parliament. The indignant parliamentarians promptly declared a hunger strike; yet, with the assistance of a SWAT team and a police detail, were forcibly thrown out of the "oval hall" (or congress).

The next step was to do away with the more influential among the opposition politicians.

In 1999, Mikhail Chigir, who had resigned as prime minister three years earlier, was subjected to judicial persecution. April of the same year saw the death under mysterious circumstances of Gennady Karpenko, a famous opposition leader. A month later, his active cohort, Yuri Zakharchenko, former secretary of internal affairs, vanished without a trace. In September, Victor Gonchar, former chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, and his friend, businessman Anatoly Krassovsky, were on their way out of a steam bath one evening. They were never seen again.

A year later, Dmitriy Zavadskiy, a young but quite famous TV journalist, also vanished without a trace. His mother, wife and son have waited for his return ever since - almost five years now.

All of these "disappearances" have been linked by the Belarusian press to Lukashenko and his "inner circle." Last year, the European Council published a report titled "People Who Disappeared in Belarus," which said there is substantial cause to assume that the people in power in Belarus were involved in the disappearances, as well as in the growing number of "prisoners of conscience" in Belarusian prisons.

In 2004 alone, about 20 independent newspapers were closed down in Belarus, and 81 periodicals received 160 written warnings from the Department of Information. A number of journalists and editors face a variety of prison terms.

The entire Western world has condemned the Belarusian regime and introduced sanctions, including Bush, who signed the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004.

Putin's Russia, however, responded with silence, then proceeded to offer economic and political support not unlike that rendered to Eduard Shevardnadze's regime in Georgia not long ago, or the regime of Leonid Kuchma, the previous leader of Ukraine.

As everyday life in Russia increasingly shows, Putin has taken the first step toward the authoritarianism of Lukashenko - and the Belarusian dictator still has quite a bit to teach his eastern colleague.

Source: Aleh Panamarou; Cincinnati Enquirer; March 6, 2005; www.news.enquirer.com

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

12. A Hrodna Dweller Fined for Distributing a Professional Union's Newspaper

The Leninski City District Court of Hrodna confirmed the decision, taken by the Leninski City District Administrative Committee upon imposing a fine (5 base amounts) on Yury Kurhanski, a member of "REPAM" Independent Trade Union, standing for the industrial workers' rights. The trade union activist was accused of distributing the "Shabier" newspaper, published by the mentioned professional union. The Leninski City District Administrative Committee regarded the

"Shabier" newspaper as a printed periodical edition, published with certain violations of the Press Law.

In order to retort "the absurd" resolution and to prove his non-culpability, Yury Kurhanski appealed to the court

However, the judicial proceedings started with imposing another three base amounts' fine on Yury Kurhanski by the judge Sabaleuskaya. The judge blamed the civil activist for protracting the court procedure. This time, Yury Kurhanski got penalized for his appeal to invite the trade union activist with legal education Andrei Kusialchuk to defend his interests in the court.

The judge retorted the civil activist was to hire a professional registered attorney.

The judge Sabaleuskaya dropped all appeals and left the previous Administrative Committee's resolution regarding Yury Kurhanski in power.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 5, 2005; www.baj.ru

BUSINESS

13. Belarus Shows Interest in Development of West, Northeast China

Visiting Foreign Minister of Belarus Sergei Martynov said Thursday that Belarus will make efforts to promote economic cooperation with China and actively participate the development of west and northeast China.

"This is an effective way to deepen the economic and trade cooperation between the two countries," he told reporters.

The northeastern part of China, including Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, used to be a heavy industries base of China. They and the western provinces lag behind of the eastern part of China in terms of economic development since the country's reform and opening-up drive.

Martynov said the China-Belarus relations were based on mutual trust, friendship and cooperation. China is the most important political and trade partner of Belarus in Asia. The two countries enjoy fruitful cooperation in such fields as trade, technology and culture.

Martynov stressed Belarus wants to further enlarge economic and trade cooperation with China by increasing variety of goods and strengthening reciprocal investment. Sales and service network for heavy industrial products such as agricultural machines and machine tools is under planning to be set up in west and northeast China.

According to the Chinese General Administration of Customs, the trade volume between China and Belarus in 2004 reached 218.9 million US dollars, up 69.8 percent over 2003. China's export volume to Belarus was 64.97 million US dollars and the import volume was 153.9 million US dollars.

Martynov also hosted the issuing ceremony for the Chinese edition of a book called "The Republic of Belarus." The book, edited by the Institute of Russia, East Europe and Central Asia Studies of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gives an introduction to history, politics, economy and culture of Belarus.

He said he hoped the book would help the Chinese people know Belarus better, and make contribution to enhance the friendship between the two countries and two peoples.

Source: People's Daily Online; March 3, 2005; english.people.com.cn

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 Sanwaree Sethi at sanwaree_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.
