

March 10-29, 2005

Edited by Sanwaree Sethi
International League for Human Rights

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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Protesters Sentenced

A Minsk court sentenced nearly two dozen protesters Monday to prison terms of 3 to 15 days for participating in an antigovernment demonstration inspired by the ongoing upheaval in Kyrgyzstan.

Nearly 1,000 people rallied outside the offices of President Aleksandr Lukashenko on Friday demanding the his resignation. Lukashenko has quashed dissent and opposition parties in the former Soviet republic.

Riot police officers eventually beat back the unauthorized rally, arresting 34 and leaving several seriously hurt.

The Minsk central district court convicted 20 protesters on charges, including organizing or participating in mass actions intended to violate social order. Rally organizers, who were scheduled to be sentenced later, could face up to three years in prison.

Opposition leaders and rights activists criticized the sentences.

"Repression will not stop the democratic process in Belarus," said the opposition leader Vyacheslav Sivchik, who was sentenced to 15 days in prison for his role in the rally.

"Authorities are turning on the judicial conveyor belt in order to try them for dissent," said Valentin Stefanovich, an opposition activist.

The rally came one day after the climax of public protests in Kyrgyzstan that forced Akayev to flee. The Central Asian country was the third former Soviet republic in the past 18 months - after Georgia and Ukraine - to see popular protests bring down long-entrenched leaders widely accused of corruption.

Belarus and the isolated Central Asian state of Turkmenistan are seen as the most repressive regimes in the former Soviet Union.

Lukashenko, who has ruled this nation of 10 million for a decade, came under strong international criticism last year for a referendum that scrapped presidential term limits and gave him the go-ahead to seek a third term in 2006.

Andrei Klimov, an opposition leader who organized the protests, said his goal was to help spark a revolution similar to those that have swept Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

Source: International Herald Tribune; March 29, 2005; www.ihf.com

2. Police Beat Back Protesters in Minsk

Belarusian police on Friday drove demonstrators calling for President Alexander Lukashenko's resignation away from his office as the government criticized Kyrgyzstan's opposition for its seizure of power.

About 1,000 opposition demonstrators tried to gather at a central square near the presidential palace in Minsk but were pushed away by police. Officers in riot gear then chased demonstrators along the streets of the capital, beating some with truncheons. Thirty-four people were detained for taking part in an unsanctioned rally.

Police spokesman Oleg Khlebchenko said Saturday that prosecutors had opened a criminal case and could charge many of those detained. They could face up to a three-year jail sentence.

Andrei Klimov, an opposition leader who organized the protests and who was still at liberty Saturday, said the regime's harsh crackdown on political opponents showed that it feared a revolution similar to those that have swept other former Soviet republics.

"The opening of a criminal case shows that Lukashenko has really taken fright at the events in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Georgia and is trying to crush any manifestation of democracy," Klimov said in an interview. "For Belarusians, the time has come for change. We can get rid of our dictatorship. The last dictatorship in Europe is surviving on fear and repression," he said.

Human rights activists agreed, saying that the authorities' heavy-handed tactics risked inflaming opposition to Lukashenko's rule.

"The mass repression against opponents of Lukashenko is aimed at preventing a revolution, but this is only bringing the situation to a head. Sooner or later, people will overcome their fear," said the head of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Tatyana Protko.

It took police about two hours Friday to disperse the protesters, who chanted "Down with Lukashenko!" and "Long Live Belarus!" A group of about 100 opposition activists regrouped and tried to gather near the presidential palace, but police again quickly pushed them out.

Friday's protest was one of the biggest in Minsk in recent months.

"By using force, Lukashenko shows he's terribly scared," Vyacheslav Sivchik, an opposition leader, said Friday. He was among those later detained.

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry on Friday harshly assailed the Kyrgyz opposition, warning that its action could destabilize the entire region.

"The unconstitutional overthrow of the government in Kyrgyzstan could have fatal consequences for peace, stability and prosperity in the country, as well as in the Central Asian region as a whole," it said.

Lukashenko came under strong international criticism last year for a referendum that scrapped presidential term limits and gave him the go-ahead to seek a third term in 2006.

Source: Yuras Karmanau; Moscow Times; March 28, 2005; www.themoscowtimes.com

3. Belarus Opposition, Businessmen Attempt to Hold Protest Rally in Minsk

Several hundred people in the Belarus capital of Minsk have attempted to hold an opposition rally in the city's central square.

Police have not let them congregate. Law enforcement officials have urged the protestors to leave the scene.

The protestors are demanding the release of political prisoners and a change to state policy regarding small and medium business. Some of them are holding up posters demanding the release of opposition leader Anatoly Shumchenko from custody.

Shumchenko, leader of the social union Perspective, organized a protest rally by Belarus businessmen on March 1. Initially he was sentenced to 10 days of imprisonment. He has been

detained further while authorities investigate an incident in which Shumchenko allegedly beat up his cell mate.

Over 1,500 businessmen held a rally at Oktyabrskaya Square demanding that value added tax be cancelled and called to "let Belarus markets work".

Source: MosNews; March 25, 2005; www.mosnews.com

4. First Candidates Announce Intentions to Seek Belarusian Presidency

The leaders of the United Civic Party (UCP) and the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPC) are the first two politicians to formally announce their intentions to run for the presidency in 2006, Belapan news agency reported on 24 March. Anatol Lyabedzka of the UCP and Syarhey Kalyakin of the BPC submitted their applications to the Democratic Forces Secretariat on 23 March. In their applications, the politicians pledged to enhance the independence and sovereignty of Belarus, establish democracy, and guarantee respect for human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the independence of the judiciary. Applications from those seeking nomination are being accepted until 25 March, Lyabedzka told Belapan. Pro-democracy activists are expected to hold conferences between 3 and 23 April to name their delegates to the National Congress of Democratic Forces. The delegates are expected to select a single opposition candidate in the summer or fall.

Source: RFE/RL; March 24, 2005; www.rferl.org

5. Belarus Boosts Self-employed

Belarus is setting up new associations to help self-employed businessmen, Interfax news agency reported Thursday.

The new associations of the self-employed, or entrepreneurial councils, will be set up in the former Soviet republic under a presidential decree that has just been drafted, the news agency said.

"It must be clearly written down how and where they will be set up and what form of protection they will have," Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko told a conference on ways to boost self-employment.

"If those councils are not protected, we won't get any information from them and they won't defend anyone.

"We shouldn't be afraid that those councils will be politicized. There will be politicization only if we don't work with them," he said.

Lukashenko urged the democratic election of the councils by secret ballot.

Source: Washington Times; March 17, 2005; www.washingtontimes.com

6. Belarus Human Rights Worsens

The human rights situation in Belarus got worse in 2004 according to the U.S. State Department's latest human rights report. Belarusian citizens are denied the right to change their government. An October 2004 referendum removed term limits for the office of president. Both the referendum and simultaneous parliamentary elections failed to meet democratic standards.

The government of President Aleksandr Lukashenko has made no credible effort to solve the presumed killing of journalist Dmitry Zavadskiy and opposition figures Yuryiy Zakharenko and Viktor Gonchar and businessman Anatoly Krasovsky.

In a move that perpetuates the climate of abuse, Belarusian authorities appointed Viktor Sheiman as head of the presidential administration. Mr. Sheiman is linked to the disappearances of Zavadskiy, Zakharenko, Gonchar and Zavadsky.

The Lukashenko government continues to target political opponents. In December 2004, a court sentenced opposition figure Mikhail Marinich to five years in prison -- later reduced to three-and-a-half years -- on a politically motivated charge of having stolen equipment from a non-governmental organization. In fact, the equipment was property of the U.S. government, which made no claim against Marinich regarding its disposition.

In 2004, the Lukashenko government suspended twenty-five independent newspapers and interfered with others. Belarusian authorities impose huge fines on journalists and editors for criticism of Mr. Lukashenko or his supporters.

The people of Belarus are eager to see democratic change come to their country. The U.S. supports their aspirations, says U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice:

"To be sure, in our world there remain outposts of tyranny -- and America stands with oppressed people on every continent -- in Cuba, and Burma, and North Korea and Iran, and Belarus, and Zimbabwe. The world should apply what Natan Sharansky calls the 'town square test': if a person cannot walk into the middle of the town square and express his or her views without fear of arrest, imprisonment, or physical harm, then that person is living in a fear society, not a free society. We cannot rest until every person living in a 'fear society' has finally won their freedom."

It is in America's interest to advance the cause of freedom. That means that the U.S. will support the development and growth of democratic movements and institutions around the world, including Belarus.

The preceding was an editorial reflecting the views of the United States government.

Source: Voice of America; March 16, 2005; www.voanews.com

7. Belarusian Scientist Backs President over Relocation from Chernobyl Areas

Opposition activist Ivan Nikitchanka, a member of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, agreed with President Lukashenka that the relocation of residents from Chornobyl-affected areas "makes no sense" any longer, Belapan reported. Nikitchanka was commenting on Lukashenka's call earlier the same day for a revision of the relocation program adopted in the wake of the 1986 blast at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant. Lukashenka argued that many people demanded relocation for the sole purpose of improving their material position. Nikitchanka stressed a different aspect of the issue. "Now the relocation of people makes no sense, because there is practically no external radiation in Chornobyl-hit areas," Nikitchanka said. "People are exposed to radiation when they consume contaminated food. But people eat contaminated food elsewhere in the country, not only in the affected areas.... The main thing is to ensure the production of radiation-free food in contaminated areas."

Source: RFE/RL; March 18, 2005; www.rferl.org

8. Belarusian President Hails 'Popular' Constitution

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka greeted the nation on Constitution Day on 15 March, saying the country's constitution "safely protects people's rights and liberties and creates conditions for realizing the potential of each person in full," Belapan reported. "The constitution is of a truly popular nature, as it was adopted through a general vote," he stressed. The constitution of independent Belarus was adopted by the Supreme Soviet on 15 March 1994. In November 1996 Belarus held a constitutional referendum, which was decried by the opposition as heavily rigged, and adopted a rewritten version of the 1994 basic law that gave Lukashenka nearly dictatorial powers. In October 2004, an even more controversial referendum lifted the constitutional two-term limit on the presidency, thus opening the way for Lukashenka's stay in power beyond 2006. Two activists of the opposition youth movement Zubr, Zmitser Dashkevich and Artur Finkevich, were arrested on 15 March for an aborted attempt to stage an anti-Lukashenka performance named "The Burial of the Basic Law" on October Square in Minsk, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported.

Source: RFE/RL; March 16, 2005; www.rferl.org

9. Teachers Are Obligated to Subscribe to Official Editions

The head of Hlybokaye District Executive Committee R. Tarasievich signed and sent out an instruction letter to all school in the area. The state official has urged all regional head masters to arrange a subscription campaign to state periodical editions among the school teachers till March 20, 2005. The list of recommended official editions includes a number of nation-wide periodicals - *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*, *Narodnaya Gazeta*, *Respublika*, *Zviazda*, *Znamya Yunosti*, regional newspapers - *Viciebski Rabochy*, *Narodnoye Slovo* as well as a district periodical edition *Viesnik Hlybochchyny*.

It should be mentioned that each teacher is made to subscribe to at least three official newspapers.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 18, 2005; www.baj.ru

10. "Free Belarus" Delivers Ultimatum

By September 16, 2005 the Belarusian regime is to carry out unbiased investigation of the Belarusian opposition leaders' disappearances Viktor Hanchar and Yuri Zakharenka, a businessman and public figure Anatol Krasouski, journalist Dzmitry Zavadski; to investigate the strange death of vice-speaker of the Supreme Soviet Henadz Karpenka, and to bring to justice all involved in disappearance and possibly assassination of the oppositionists and a journalist. Otherwise on September 16, on the sixth anniversary of abduction of vice-prime minister Viktor Hanchar and businessman Anatol Krasouski a mass protest rally is to be organized in Belarus. This ultimatum to the authorities was presented by the representatives of the Council of Civil Initiatives "Free Belarus".

"Six years have passed, but the Belarusian authorities had not managed to find my husband, Anatol Krasouski, had not found out the fate of the Vice-Speaker of the Supreme Soviet Viktor Hanchar, former Interior Minister Yuri Zakharenka. Over the five years the abductors of Dzmitry Zavadski were not found. The concern over the disappearances of the opposition leaders and a journalist has been expressed by the European Union, the UN Committee on Human Rights, the OSCE and the Council of Europe. All these structures have demanded the authorities to carry out a fair investigation of politically motivated disappearances immediately. The only side that hushes up the problem is the Belarusian authorities. This all happens against the background of intensified repressions against the civil society. People are arrested during the protest actions,

parties and independent structures are closed, independent media are constantly cracked down. The time has come to deliver an ultimatum to the authorities," told at today's press conference in Minsk the leader of the civil initiative "We Remember" Iryna Krasouskaya.

Iryna Krasouskaya reminded that the alleged assassins of the Ukrainian journalist Heorhiy Gongadze were brought to account right after the democratic candidate Viktor Yushchenko had come to power. As said by her, it should impress the Belarusian officials greatly. Moreover, former Prosecutor General Viktor Shejman; Interior Minister Uladzimir Navumau; Sports and Tourism Minister, former Interior Minister Yuri Sivakou, SWAT commander Dzmitry Paulichenka, are recognized as suspects in the Belarusian politicians' abductions by the international community. All these people are banned entry to the territory of the European Union and the USA.

"We know what had happened in Ukraine after the assassination of journalist Gongadze, what had happened in Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri. Hundreds thousands of Ukrainians, thousands of the Lebanese took to the streets. If the problem had not been raised by us constantly, there would be much more assassinations and repressions. If the Belarusian authorities had not been able to investigate the cases of the disappeared, they should address for international help. I am sure that they would not refuse to help," stated the coordinator of the civil initiative Charter'97 Zmitser Bandarenka.

The members of the Council of Civil Initiatives "Free Belarus" believe that Viktor Shejman, Uladzimir Navumau, Dzmitry Paulichenka and Yuri Sivakou must resign, as the resolutions of the PACE and the European Parliament require.

Source: Charter97; March 15, 2005; www.charter97.org

11. Minsk Rejects Opposition Rally Request

The Minsk city administration has rejected a request by opposition politician Andrey Klimaw to stage a downtown protest rally on 25 March, Belapan News reported on 22 March. Klimaw says he intended to assemble up to 100,000 people to protest Alyaksandr Lukashenka's intention to run for a third presidential term. Klimaw told Belapan he is not surprised by the refusal, although the explanation baffles him. The city government told him that the location where he intended to hold the rally, Kastychnitskaya Square, is not designed for events involving more than 1,000 people and that he had not produced a letter guaranteeing that he would pay for cleaning the square afterward. Klimaw said, "A revolution is historically unavoidable in Belarus. March 25 will mark the beginning of the fall of this government," Belapan reported.

Source: RFE/RL; March 23, 2005; www.rferl.org

REGIONAL

12. Belarusian Politicians Comment on Kyrgyz Developments

Alluding to the mass protests in Kyrgyzstan that culminated in the flight of President Askar Akaev on 24 March, prominent Belarusian opposition politician Andrey Klimaw warned Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenko to resign and "give up his intention to run in the 2006 election," Belapan reported on 24 March. Anatol Lyabedzka, leader of the United Civic Party, noted that people in Kyrgyzstan were just defending their choice. "The same thing may happen not only in Belarus, but also in any other post-Soviet country," Lyabedzka told Belapan. "Something that two years ago was thought to be impossible has become a reality." "Everybody expected a revolution in Moldova, but it happened in Kyrgyzstan instead," said Uladzimir Nistsyuk of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (People's Hramada). House of Representatives member Vasil Khrol

ruled out the possibility of a Kyrgyz-style revolution in Belarus, saying he does not expect any revolution to occur in Belarus in the next 20 years, Belapan reported on 24 March.

Source: RFE/RL; March 25, 2005; www.rferl.org

13. CIS Foreign Ministers Assign Priority to Economic Cooperation

Foreign Ministers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) believe that economic interaction within the CIS remains a priority of the CIS countries' cooperation, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said following the session of the Council of CIS Foreign Ministers in Minsk on Friday.

"Everyone [CIS Foreign Ministers] agreed that economic interaction remained a priority within the CIS framework," he noted.

"Free trade issues can be seen in any association within the CIS. If we take no joint efforts, we shall not succeed in anything," Lavrov stressed.

According to Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov, his CIS counterparts are discussing ways to make the CIS work more effective on the instructions of the CIS leaders.

The CIS summit will be held in Kazan in August 2005, Sergei Lavrov said.

"We approved of proposals on the key trends of the improvement and reforms of the CIS bodies which will be submitted to the CIS leaders at the Kazan summit in August," the Russian Foreign Minister told journalists.

Source: Ria Novosti; March 18, 2005; www.rian.ru

14. It is Necessary to Control Russian and Belarus Fuel and Energy Companies

There is no proper control over Russian and Belarus major fuel and energy holdings, Russian Minister of the Interior Rashid Nurgaliyev believes.

"The activity of major holdings is not properly controlled, there is no comprehensive approach to crime detection in the stages of extraction, transportation and processing of energy resources," the minister told the joint collegium of Russian and Belarus interior ministries.

For this reason criminal schemes are still applied in this sector, the official said.

Moreover, this sector is favorable for major corruption ties and lobbyist relations, which distort the legal field.

Nurgaliyev also pressed for focusing on the drug problem in Russia and Belarus at the governmental level.

He noted a wide extent of drug-trafficking, pointing out that the volume of confiscated drugs prove government officials' involvement in narcotic business.

In this connection the minister added that the problem of corruption must not be ignored.

"We are particularly concerned about the smuggling of highly concentrated opium drugs from Central Asia and the expanding flow of synthetic drugs from Baltic states and some East and West European countries," Nurgaliyev was quoted as saying.

According to him, Russia and Belarus suffer narcotic expansion owing to the countries' favorable geographic position, the transparency of CIS borders and a sharp growth in Afghan drug production, which needs new outlets.

The minister stressed that, first of all, it is necessary to intensify field work. "To improve measures against international criminal groups Russia and Belarus must carry out joint controlled deliveries," Nurgaliyev remarked.

Source: Ria Novosti; March 18, 2005; www.rian.ru

15. Belarus, Gazprom Agree to Enlarge Natural Gas Transit

Belarus and Gazprom have coordinated enlargement of Russian natural gas transit, Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky said on Tuesday.

"We are fulfilling our commitments in Russian gas transit," he said.

"The issue was not on the agenda of the Tuesday meeting of the Russia-Belarus Council of Ministers, but work goes on, and gas transit through Belarus will increase," Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov said

Source: Itar-Tass; March 15, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

16. Belarus for Settlement of Disputes in Kyrgyzstan within Law

The Belarusian Foreign Ministry is concerned over the destabilization in south Kyrgyzstan, Ruslan Yesin, the foreign ministry spokesman, said on Tuesday, noting that the processes in Kyrgyzstan were the republic's domestic affair.

He said at the same time that staging mass disturbances and seizing public buildings could not be a constructive instrument of settling political differences. Therefore, Belarus "urges all the parties concerned to settle any disputes within law," Yesin said.

Source: Itar-Tass; March 15, 2005; www.itar-tass.com

17. Communist Leader Calls on Former Soviet Republics to Unite

Opening the second Congress of the peoples of Russia and Belarus in Moscow on Saturday, KPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) leader Gennady Zyuganov named the "struggle for reunification of the peoples of former Soviet republics" as the forum's chief objective.

"The recent developments on the territory of the former Soviet Union - the "orange", "rose" and other revolutions - provide ample proof for understanding that unless we take proper action similar processes will sweep the rest of the region, which, in the end, will cause disintegration of Russia itself," Zyuganov said.

Therefore, the states that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union should reunite, with Russia being open for voluntary accession to it of former Soviet republics, KPRF leader maintained.

"This new union state ought to emerge on the basis of reunification of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as we have common historical, ethnic and cultural roots," Zyuganov said, calling on

political parties and public associations as well as leaders of CIS and Baltic countries to support "the official reunification of fraternal nations into a united state".

The forum is attended by over a thousand delegates and guests from nearly all former Soviet republics.

Source: RiaNovosti; March 26, 2005; www.rian.ru

INTERNATIONAL

18. Time, Place Unacceptable for Meeting of Belarus, EU Officials

Belarus said the proposed time and place of a meeting between Belarusian Foreign Ministry representatives and European Commission member Benita Ferrero-Waldner are unacceptable, Belarusian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Mikhnevich told journalists in Minsk on Friday.

"Belarus received suggestions to organize a meeting between Belarusian Foreign Ministry representatives and European Union commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, but considered the proposed time and place of the meeting unacceptable," Mikhnevich said.

Source: Interfax; March 18, 2005; www.interfax.ru

19. Belarus Supports China's Anti-secession Law

The Republic of Belarus on Monday voiced support for China's anti-secession law, saying the legislation is compatible with the interests of all Chinese people and conducive to regional and world peace and stability.

Belarus said in a statement that it will scrupulously abide by the commitments made in bilateral political documents signed with China regarding the Taiwan issue and supports China's rights to maintain sovereignty, territorial integrity and to achieve national reunification.

China's top legislature, the National People's Congress (NPC), unanimously ratified the anti-secession law Monday, setting a legal framework to prevent Taiwan's secession from China and to promote peaceful national reunification.

Chinese President Hu Jintao signed a presidential order for the immediate promulgation of the law at Monday's session. The law became effective upon promulgation.

The law, which consists of 10 articles, provides for the legislative purpose and scope of application of the legislation, the nature of the Taiwan issue, achieving national reunification through peaceful means and taking non-peaceful means to stop Taiwan's secession from China by the "Taiwan independence" secessionist forces.

Source: People's Daily Online March 15, 2005; english.people.com.cn

20. European Union Pronounces Belarus a State of Dictatorship

The reaction of Belarusian authorities to the European Parliament's resolution was traditionally tough

The European Union intends to provide direct funds to create the civil society in Belarus. Head of the European Commission's Delegation to Belarus, Ambassador Ian Boag, announced that the

EU would use new financial mechanisms to strengthen the civil society in addition to the TACIS program, the projects of which had been coordinated with the Belarusian government.

The relations between the EU and Belarus have been worsening for quite a while already. On March 10th, the European Parliament released a statement, in which it was said that the Belarusian regime should be denounced as dictatorship. European parliamentarians are concerned about last year's referendum, which endowed President Alexander Lukashenko with an opportunity to run at all impending presidential elections, about the suppression of independent media outlets in the country and so on.

The resolution of the European Parliament says that personal accounts of President Lukashenko and other high-ranking Belarusian officials should be tracked and frozen. In addition, it was suggested the EU should extend the list of Belarusian officials, whose entry to Belarus must be denied. The decision of the European Parliament also stipulates for the establishment of TV and radio stations to broadcast their programs in Belarus. European parliamentarians said that the situation in Belarus would be a subject for constant consultations between the EU and Russia.

The reaction of Belarusian authorities to the resolution was traditionally tough. "The appearance of another stereotyped document depreciates the European Parliament's role and the significance of this European institute," a spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry, Ruslan Yesin said. "The resolution urges to run a blind and fruitless course," the official said.

The European resolution echoes with the Act on Democracy in Belarus, which the USA passed last year. However, the worsening of relations with Europe might exert a much more serious influence on the country. "All EU states received political recommendations to consider Belarus a country, in which dictatorship reigns. There are several major trade partners of Belarus among those states," scientist of politics Alexander Feduta said in an interview with Vremya Novostei.

Source: Pravda; March 14, 2005; www.pravda.ru

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

21. League Activities at the 61st Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights

On March 22–29, 2005, the International League for Human Rights attended the 61st Session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland, where it held a series of political meetings and speaking events on the issue of deteriorating human rights conditions in Belarus.

On March 29, the League in partnership with the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OMCT) hosted a briefing entitled *Belarus: Tightening the Noose Around Civil Society*. The League brought to Geneva Svetlana Zavadskaya, wife of the disappeared cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky and co-Chairman of the NGO We Remember, Olga Stuzhinskaya, Free Belarus movement, and Sergei Salash, a longtime pro-democracy activist and Chairman of NGO Skryzhavanne to serve as first-hand witnesses to the Lukashenko regime's assault on fundamental human rights of Belarusian citizens. The briefing was well attended by numerous country and NGO representatives, as well as the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, Mr. Adrian Severin.

Below, please find the intervention made by the League during the Agenda item 9 discussions on March 24, 2005, as well as a statement by Svetlana Zavadskaya, wife of the disappeared cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky and co-Chairman of the Minsk-based organization We Remember, which seeks justice in the cases of politically motivated disappearances in Belarus.

**Statement on behalf of the
International League for Human Rights
61st Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights
Geneva, Switzerland
March 24, 2005**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

Fifteen years ago, the members of this UN Commission on Human Rights stood for a moment of silence in honor of the great Russian human rights leader and Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov whose voice helped improve the world's moral climate. Today, the International League for Human Rights, a 63-year old organization of which Sakharov was Honorary Vice President, asks you not to remain silent in the face of current human rights abuses in Russia and Belarus. We request that you raise your voices to ensure that a just acquittal is handed down on March 28 in the trial of the director of the Andrei Sakharov Museum in Moscow, Yuri Samodurov, the curator Ludmilla Vasilovskaya, and artist Anna Mikhachuk, who face imprisonment for organizing an exhibition of creative works of art. The trial's outcome will be an important indicator of the extent to which Russia is either reverting to the authoritarian practices of Soviet times or progressing on the road to full observance of the rule of law. A document detailing this case is appended to this intervention.

I now turn to the subject of Belarus.

Following the fraudulent 2004 parliamentary elections and presidential term limit referendum, Aleksandr Lukashenko has maintained a stronghold on the Belarusian civil society through a repressive regime that regularly violates fundamental human rights and exhibits nothing but visceral hatred for dissent. Internal conditions in Belarus continue to deteriorate at an alarming speed, as government sanctioned harassment campaigns against pro-democracy activists are escalating.

Detentions and punitive fines have become a common occurrence for many active in civil society. The Belarusian people's right to assemble and protest is currently threatened by the draconian Law on Mass Actions, which toughened the requirements for conducting public actions, such as a protest rally, and allows authorities to shut down a civic group after a single violation of the law. The few remaining independent publications are facing a de facto ban on printing and distributing the newspaper in Belarus. NGOs and political groups are relentlessly persecuted.

Currently Belarus has several political prisoners, including Mikhail Marinich, Valery Levonevsky and Aleksandr Vasilyev. Marinich was proving himself to be a viable political rival, capable of competing with Lukashenko in the future presidential election, while Levonevsky and Vasilyev were able to organize a rally during which more than 5 thousand people came out to protest against Lukashenko's policies aimed against small businesses, independent entrepreneurs and pensioners. Mikhail Marinich has recently suffered a stroke. His health remains in jeopardy.

Furthermore, the Lukashenko regime continues to violate the Belarusians' linguistic and cultural rights by shutting down Belarusian language schools and institutions of higher learning, such as the Yakub Kolas Lyceum and the European Humanitarian University.

Today, the activities of many religious minority groups in Belarus are severely limited because of registration requirements and other de facto restrictions. Anti-Semitic propaganda is promoted by the state and some traditional religious communities and is exacerbated by the government's refusal to acknowledge the existence of anti-Semitism in the country. By failing to prosecute the perpetrators of hate crimes, the government provides de facto support for anti-Semitism. Thus we urge the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination and Related Intolerance and the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion to be invited to monitor and report on the problem of intolerance, including anti-Semitism, in Belarus.

Meanwhile, the cases of the disappeared political figures, including Anatoly Krasovsky, Viktor Gonchar, Yuri Zakharenko, and ORT cameraman Dmitry Zavadsky have remained stagnant despite great international attention and credible allegations implicating government officials in the disappearances.

Sadly, those who are brave enough to defend their rights face government harassment and persecution. Belarusian independent media and political opposition feel abandoned and demoralized. Without outside support, the Belarusian landscape is in danger of remaining without a civil society of any kind.

What makes this an urgent issue is that the Belarusian government has not been compliant with the full terms and conditions set out by the Commission's last resolution. Specifically, despite repeated requests, the Belarusian authorities denied an entry visa to Mr. Severin, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Belarus.

We appeal to the Commission on Human Rights to adopt a resolution criticizing the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus, which will:

- express serious concern about the continuing human rights violations and political repressions in Belarus;
- call on the Belarusian government to uphold fundamental rights and freedoms of its citizens, including social, political, cultural and linguistic, as well as religious rights;
- require unconditional compliance with Resolution E/CN.4/2004/L.22 of April 16, 2004;
- call on the government of Belarus to cooperate fully with all mechanisms of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights and to extend prompt invitations to the Commission's special rapporteurs, particularly those named in the Resolution adopted on April 16, 2004;
- extend the mandate of a Special Rapporteur on the situation of Human Rights in Belarus, established in 2004.

Thank you for your attention.

Statement of Svetlana Zavadskaya
Co-Chairman of the Belarusian Civil Initiative We Remember
61st Session of the UN Commission on Human Rights
Geneva, Switzerland
March 29, 2005

I would like to welcome all those who came here today, all those who believe in the rule of law and the value of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Before my tragedy, I never had interest in politics. Afterwards, I had no other option but to become active. This is why, following a number of politically motivated abductions and murders which shook Belarus, I, along with Irina Krasovskaya, set up a civil organization called *We Remember* which works on bringing justice in the cases of the disappeared persons.

Over the past 5 years, despite great pressure from the state, we undertook more than 300 trips all around the world in order to inform the international community about the danger of the Lukashenko dictatorship in Belarus, a country located in the center of Europe.

Just like 2 years ago, when the Lukashenko regime for the first time became a focus of the U.N. Commission for Human Rights, I am here today to do my part in helping to pass this year's resolution on Belarus, which was introduced by the United States and the European Union.

So far, the Belarusian government has met very few provisions of the 2003 and 2004 resolutions. In fact, human rights conditions in Belarus continue to decline dramatically.

For example, to date, 4 politically motivated disappearances have taken place in Belarus. In 1999, the former Interior Minister Yuri Zakarenko, Vice Speaker of the Parliament Viktor Gonchar and Anatoly Krasovsky, a businessman who helped the pro-democratic forces, were abducted. In 2000, my husband, Dmitry Zavadsky, a cameraman for a Russian television channel, was abducted and disappeared without a trace.

In 2004, as in previous years, no actions were undertaken to investigate political disappearances and to uncover the fates of those abducted. The authorities' efforts to investigate these criminal cases did not intensify even after this issue became a priority for the international community, as demonstrated by the fact that the U.N. Commission for Human Rights adopted a second resolution on Belarus; the Council of Europe passed a strongly worded resolution, following Christos Pourgourides' critical report on the disappeared persons; and the U.S. Congress passed the Belarus Democracy Act passed, which was signed by President Bush.

Even after the Council of Europe resolution named government officials implicated in the political kidnappings, these individuals continue to occupy high-level positions in the Lukashenko government. These include the former Prosecutor General (now head of the Presidential Administration) Viktor Sheiman, former Interior Minister Yuri Sivakov, Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov, and a special forces commander Dmitry Pavlichenko.

In an effort to hide the truth, the authorities detained more than 25 activists of the youth resistance movement Zubr for distributing the report of Christos Pourgourides, a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. More than 100 people were arrested for taking part in protests against politically motivated disappearances in Belarus.

Additionally, more than 300 persons were detained and more than 100 imprisoned for participating in rallies against the lawlessness of the ruling regime and the social-economic instability. The general number of arbitrary detentions and arrests countrywide exceeds 1,500. Last Friday, March 25, the Belarusian regime once more brutally dispersed a peaceful street rally in honor of the Belarusian traditional Independence Day. Many of the protesters were arrested and face prison terms.

Also in 2004, three political show trials of prominent members of the democratic opposition Valery Levonevsky, Aleksandr Vasilyev and Mikhail Marinich took place. The three men were convicted and remain in prison. Amnesty International named Levonevsky, Vasilyev and Marinich Prisoners of Conscience. Again, these trials proved that there is no division of powers in Belarus; just like the other branches of government, the judiciary branch is placed under the absolute control of the head of state.

2004 can be called the year of silent annihilation of civil organizations and independent mass media outlets, dozens of which were shut down by the authorities. Since no alternative distribution and publishing network is allowed to exist, the regime maintains a total monopoly and tight control over the mass media market and information flow to the Belarusian people.

Today, I am speaking to you on behalf of the relatives and loved ones of those abducted and murdered five years ago, on behalf of representatives of Belarusian civil society who are facing persecution from the Lukashenko regime. I am asking you to be guided by your conscience and to appeal to members of this Commission to vote in favor of the resolution on Belarus.

Thank you

22. UN Representative Criticizes Human Rights in Belarus

A United Nations representative says he is gravely concerned about what he calls the continuous deterioration of human rights in Belarus.

Special Rapporteur Adrian Severin says he has concluded that Belarus is a controlled society that is close to becoming a dictatorship.

In a report to the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, he expressed concern about media freedom, and the unresolved disappearances in 1999 and 2000 of four opposition figures. He also said he was told torture is routinely used to get information from detainees.

He said lack of national identity and a real and strong civil society are also problems in Belarus.

The Belarusian ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva has rejected the report as biased and accused the rapporteur of interfering in Belarusian internal affairs. He is demanding an apology.

Source: Voice of America; March 29, 2005; www.voanews.com

23. Press Freedom in Belarus Deteriorating: OSCE

Press freedom conditions in Belarus have been deteriorating in recent years due to government pressure on independent media, according to a new report by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) media watchdog.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Miklos Haraszti, says independent media "are under constant pressure through judicial, extra-judicial and economic means." Under Belarusian law, the government has wide powers to suspend and close media outlets if content is deemed to be overly critical of the president.

Legal harassment, in the form of libel and defamation actions, is also causing a chilling effect on journalists, says Haraszti. "Belarus is the only OSCE participating State where people are serving actual prison sentences for violating the dignity of the President," he notes. Current legislation criminalises libel and also provides special protection to officials, including the president.

The OSCE report follows a February visit to Belarus where Haraszti met with senior government officials, parliamentarians, journalists and representatives of non-governmental organisations. Haraszti says his office is willing to assist Belarus in improving its press freedom record by providing advice and recommendations for legal reform.

Read the full report here: http://www.osce.org/documents/rfm/2005/03/4390_en.pdf

Source: IFEX; March 16, 2005; www.ifex.org

24. A Public Prosecutor Notified the *Volny Horad* Editor-in-Chief

Siarhiej Niarouny, the *Volny Horad* Krychau-located non-registered newspaper editor-in-chief was summoned to Krychau Inter-District Public Prosecutor's office at the beginning of March 2005. The independent periodical publisher got notified by the public prosecutor of "publishing newspaper articles, calling to overthrow the government as well as offending the President and the local authorities.

The public prosecutor Mikalaj Rozancau informed the edition editor, the notification was based on the appeal submitted by the Krychau District Executive Committee chairman Ivan Prakopau. The public prosecutor refused to show or name concrete publications the newspaper publisher was blamed for.

It should be mentioned that Siarhiey Niarouny is registered as a candidate for by-election to the Regional Council of Deputies to be held on March 20. Being a well-known democratic candidate he has high chances to win the election.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 18, 2005; www.baj.ru

25. Polish Journalists Released In Belarus

Belarusian authorities have released three Polish journalists who were briefly detained for lacking proper media credentials.

One of the reporters, Marcin Smialowski of the Polsat private TV channel, said he and two colleagues were detained yesterday at a polling station in the city of Grodno, about 280 kilometers west of the capital Minsk. They were covering an election for a district seat in parliament.

Smialowski said the incident is proof of the overall state of media freedom in Belarus. He accused Belarusian security services of keeping the three under constant surveillance during their time in Belarus.

He said they were held for three hours until the Polish consul intervened.

The West has accused Belarus of stifling political opposition and independent media and carrying out human rights abuses.

Source: RFE/RL; March 21, 2005; www.rferl.org

26. Press Survey Slams Belarusian Media Freedom

The Vienna-based International Press Institute (IPI) released its 2004 World Press Freedom Review on 22 March, in which it reported that Belarusian authorities had harassed and intimidated independent media in the run-up to the October 2004 parliamentary elections. The IPI report, as cited by Belapan, rebuked the Belarusian government for persecuting journalists for publishing critical articles on a website run by Charter 97, a human rights organization not recognized by the authorities, and other acts perceived to be aimed at preventing a free press. The IPI report gave numerous examples of how authorities interrupted television broadcasts that focused on the situation in Belarus and how the Belarusian KGB attempted to break into the offices of four NGOs whose members were journalists. The World Press Freedom Review also mentioned that more than 10 publications were suspended in the months preceding the October elections.

Source: RFE/RL; March 23, 2005; www.rferl.org

27. Statement of the Belarusian Association of Journalists

At 11 am on March 24, 2005, the living apartment, rented by an individual entrepreneur and the "Zhoda" independent newspaper editor-in-chief Aliaksei Karol were visited by a police officer from the Partyzanski City District Department of Internal Affairs in Minsk. The policeman told he had

received a complaint, submitted by a local dweller. The unknown informer blamed the apartment tenant for creating printed production "defaming the state authorities".

Later, there came one more police captain and four civilians to the apartment. One of them started filming the living quarters, with no explanations. Then, there came a lady, who introduced herself as Olga Doroshko (?). She told she was representing the Ministry of Information. She showed no identifying documents. A bit later, there came another civilian, who presented himself as "Dima from militia". He informed the "Zhoda" editorial team member Aliaksandar Zdvizhkov that there would be carried out inspection of the living premises. The person was followed by a group of policemen from the Partyzanski City District Department of Internal Affairs. The people introduced themselves as an executive legal investigation group.

Immediately afterwards, there were examined all built-in closets in the premises. Aliaksandar Zdvizhkov urged the police officials to show the documents, permitting to examine the apartment. "Dima from militia" told there was no need in such documents for inspecting the premises.

After a three-hour examination, there were confiscated 17 graphical images from the walls, which had been published in the "Zhoda" newspaper. Also, there were seized 4 hard discs from the computers at the apartment. All seized property was sealed up. Then, the police group completed a protocol on the investigatory activities and the confiscation matters. The state officials refused to give a copy of this document to A. Zdvizhkov on his request.

During the inspection procedure, A. Zdvizhkov and all other journalists were banned to use their mobile phones.

On A. Karol's coming, the "Zhoda" editor-chief was invited to proceed to the Partyzanski City District Department of Internal Affairs "to have a talk". During the talk, A. Karol received no answer on the purpose and the legality of the held investigation procedure in the rented apartment.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists would like to stress the fact that the police officers and unknown civilians entered unlawfully a private apartment, held a corrupt examination of the living quarters and seized private property with no legal explanations.

As a result, there were petrified the "Zhoda" journalists' activities.

The Belarusian Association of Journalists states that it was the first time the state authorities held so largely scaled and impudent unlawful actions in relation to an officially registered independent periodical in Belarus.

Source: Belarusian Association of Journalists; March 24, 2005; www.baj.ru

BUSINESS

28. Belarusian Premier: Ruble May be Introduced in Belarus in 2006

Belarusian Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky said that it is possible the Russian ruble would be introduced on Belarus's territory as a single currency of a Russian-Belarusian union state.

Sidorsky noted that Russia and Belarus have coordinated a plan of cooperative actions for 2005 to introduce the ruble as a single currency. "We are ready to actively work in this sphere," Sidorsky said.

Source: Interfax; March 16, 2005; www.interfax.ru

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@hotmail.com or Olga Tarasov, CIS Program Officer, at 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.
