

December 8 – December 14, 2005

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DOMESTIC

1. Belarus Toughens up Anti-Terror Laws

The Belarusian House of Representatives (the country's lower chamber of parliament) has passed a bill toughening the punishment for those caught sponsoring terrorism as well as amendments to the country's Criminal Code, RIA Novosti reported.

Those who provide money or raise funds for terrorism will now face from eight to 12 years in prison and the expropriation of property. However, such people will escape prosecution if they confess to the authorities and help prevent terrorist attacks or solve crimes.

The decision whether a certain organization is terrorist or not will be taken by the Belarusian Supreme Court.

The amendments to the country's legislation were introduced so that it corresponded to the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism.

Source: MosNews.Com, December 14, 2005; www.mosnews.com

2. Belarus Moves To Limit Online Dating

Belarusian lawmakers on Wednesday passed legislation that would crack down on Internet dating and online spouse searches in the latest in a series of stringent government controls backed by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Authorities say the measure, which was passed 101-1 by the subservient lower house of parliament, is intended to help halt human trafficking in the ex-Soviet nation.

The legislation would place new restrictions on organizations that promote dating or that help match potential suitors with spouses, particularly via the Internet.

The bill also would require Belarusian students seeking to study abroad to receive written permission from the Ministry of Education, if the study is longer than 30 days. Foreign companies seeking to hire Belarusian students for summer jobs would also be required to get approval from the Education Ministry.

"The measures are directed at improving the mechanisms guaranteeing effective counteraction to human trafficking - one of the most dangerous phenomenon modern society faces in its development," First Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Shurko told parliament.

Lukashenko has made his nation of 10 million people a pariah in the West by stifling dissent, persecuting independent media and opposition parties and prolonging his power through elections that international organizations say were marred by fraud.

Earlier this year, Lukashenko placed new, tight restrictions on Belarusians' foreign adoptions as well as modeling and wedding firms.

Source: Seattle Post-Intelligencer; December 14, 2005; <http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/>

3. Belarus Facing Severe Demographic Problems

The image of Belarus propagated for domestic consumption by the authorities is one of relative prosperity, civil peace, and stability. However, that image is increasingly belied by the evident failure to take adequate measures to offset a looming demographic crisis. According to some analysts, the population of Belarus is declining at such a rate that its future extinction is a definite possibility.

In late November, the Ministry of Statistics and Analysis reported that in the first nine months of 2005, the population had declined by 38,600, and by November 1, it stood at 9,762,500. The death rate of 106,100 exceeded the birth rate of 67,500, with the most marked population drop in the northern province of Vitsebsk, followed by Minsk region, and Mahileu. These figures appear even more remarkable given the improvement in figures recently for infant mortality, which at 6.4 per 1,000 children born is comparable with the more prosperous countries of Europe (*Narodnaya Volya*, November 22).

Over the course of 2004, the population declined by 49,000. In that period there was a notable contrast between the city and the village. Whereas the urban population rose by 10,500, the rural sector dropped by 59,500 people; and composed 2.74 million or just under 28% of the total (*Narodnaya Volya*, February 22). In general, the high mortality rates in the republic owed much to a sharp rise in the number of deaths from infectious diseases, as well as respiratory illnesses, those connected with transport accidents, as well as a continuing rise in alcoholism (*Belorusskiy Rynok*, March 14-20).

According to the Ministry of Public Health Care, there are more than 253,000 alcoholics and drug addicts in Belarus today, a rise of 4.1% over the figure for January 2005. The total includes more than 169,000 male alcoholics, 6,000 women, and 57,965 who are registered drug addicts. According to the chief health official in this sphere, Uladzimir Maksymchuk, only 22% of residents of Belarus lead a "sober way of life," 42% drink occasionally, 26% drink quite frequently, and 10% drink habitually (*Narodnaya Volya*, December 8).

The Belarusian government has directed periodic attention to these problems without coming up with any potential solutions. The press service of the president announced in the spring that a program for the revival and development of villages and collective farms to the year 2010 would soon be introduced, with an assigned sum of BR69.8 billion (\$32.4 million) (*Svobodnye Novosti Plus*, March 30-April 6). Such a program would follow a 2002 law "On the Demographic Security of the Republic of Belarus," as well as a national program "for the demographic security of Belarus 2006-2010," and a program for the social and economic development and revival of the village (*Narodnaya Volya*, April 26). But how can one revive a village system that is rapidly dying out, and in which by the year 2025, one in every three residents of the republic will be a pensioner? (CTV, August 11)

The population decline began in 1994 (it reached a peak of 10.24 million at the end of 1993), and according to figures produced by the UN, by the year 2050 there may be only 7 million people left in Belarus. Life expectancy for Belarusian men is 62.8 years, more than 13 years less than in Germany and France, and eight years less than in Poland. Women's lifespan is considerably better at 74.3 years (*Narodnaya Volya*, October 20).

According to Ivan Nikitchenka, a corresponding member of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, the government's failure to respond adequately to the after-effects of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster has played a key role in the present crisis. He notes that nothing has changed for the better since the government adopted programs to improve rural life. Further, 1.8 million people continue to live in contaminated zones (about 60% in Homel oblast) and consume what they grow in their gardens. Of those who check their health at the Belarusian Institute of Radiation Medicine, 60-70% have excess radioactivity at critical levels in their body. There are more than 16,000 liquidators living in Belarus, he notes, and mortality rates among them rose sharply in 2002 compared to the previous decade, mostly through heart disease. Nikitchenka also notes that morbidity levels among children have increased by almost one-third, new cancers by 1.5 times, and blood diseases by 1.5 times (*Narodnaya Volya*, April 26).

Chernobyl, however, is not the whole story. Other sources focus on what they describe as "family breakdown," particularly when compared with the Soviet period. More than 23% of families consist of single parents, 37% of families have no children (a further 23.5% have one child), and nearly 30% of families have no working members. Moreover, about half the families have no

children because of their difficult material situation. Almost 50% of family income is spent on food, and family members seek refuge in alcohol to assuage their stress and anxiety (*Narodnaya Volya*, August 4).

The overall picture in Belarus belies the government's portrayal of a healthy and flourishing society. Declines in the real value of wages, poor nutrition, and unhealthy lifestyles have exacerbated a situation made difficult by Chernobyl and the collapse of the USSR five years later.

Source: David Marples, The Jamestown Foundation; December 13, 2005; <http://jamestown.org/>

4. Belarus Jewish Community Fears Resurgence of Neo-Nazism

Representatives of the Jewish community have expressed concern over "growing neo-Nazi tendencies" in Belarusian society.

A statement made by the Union of Belarusian Jewish Associations and Communities says that "the Jewish community is concerned by another anti-Semitic act of defacing memorials to Stalin terror victims". "Memories of defamation of Yama memorial in Minsk by vandals in August this year are still very much alive in our memories and here comes another act of vandalism in Kurapaty which affected the memorials of other denominations," the statement said.

Particularly worrying is the SS graffiti on the memorial. "Responsibility for the act has been claimed by the Slavic Union for Rus, which apparently embodies not only chauvinism, but also neo-Nazism," the statement said.

"All these facts cannot but engender the concern of Belarusian Jews for their future and for the safety of their children and grandchildren. The Jewish community hereby expresses its concern at resurgent neo-Nazi tendencies in society and hopes that this act of vandalism will not escape the notice of state agencies." / Belapan News Agency

Source: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union; December 12, 2005; <http://www.fsmonitor.com/stories/121205Belarus.shtml>

5. Activists Criticize Belarusian Amendments

Human rights groups and opposition activists in Belarus have strongly criticized a set of restrictive amendments to the Criminal Code that the country's upper house of parliament has unanimously approved.

The changes, which must be signed by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, would make it a crime punishable by up to two years in jail to "discredit" Belarus in the eyes of foreign organizations and governments. People convicted of circulating "false information" about the country would face similar prison terms under the new law.

The proposed legislation also envisions tough penalties for anyone convicted of inciting demonstrations, or calling on foreign states or nongovernmental groups to "commit actions damaging Belarus external security."

The Belarusian opposition says the proposed legislation is part of a policy of intimidation ahead of the 2006 presidential polls. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has also expressed its concern.

Source: RFE/RL; December 9, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

6. Belarusian Lower House Passes Pardon Bill

The Chamber of Representatives on 8 December approved in the second reading a bill of amendments to the Criminal Code that would allow the president to discharge offenders who have "voluntarily" indemnified for the damage or loss caused, Belapan reported.

The bill, which was submitted by President Lukashenka, would allow the head of state to release from criminal responsibility those accused of committing crimes against state property or state and public interests without causing any harm to human health and life. To be entitled to a presidential pardon edict, a person would have to repent, cooperate with investigators, and indemnify for all losses and damages during a pretrial stage of criminal proceedings.

Deputy Mikalay Dubovik noted in the debate that the bill would not apply to people who have committed a petty theft, but rather to people who "have stolen millions from the state." He added the bill runs counter to President Lukashenka's standing order that the government should introduce tighter punishment for corruption. Despite this objection, the lower house voted overwhelmingly to pass the legislation.

Source: RFE/RL; December 9, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

REGIONAL

7. Official Minsk Intensifies Informational Influence On Russia

On Monday, Armen Oganessian, Chairman of the Russian State Broadcasting Company Golos Rossii (Voice of Russia) and Vladimir Matveichuk, Head of the Belarusian National State Broadcasting Company signed a cooperation agreement. Matveichuk traveled to Moscow for the signing.

Under the signed agreement framework, two radio stations will engage in informational exchange of materials about the life of Russian and Belarusian diasporas abroad. Radio bridges on topics relevant for both countries, such as trade and economical cooperation, vital aspects of establishing the Union State building and practical steps for its realization are also planned under the cooperation framework.

Additionally, this agreement will also widen the correspondents' network of both radio stations. Internships and trainings of Belarusian correspondents with Golos Rossii, as well as a number of exchanges of experience in the broadcasting field, such as seminars, conferences, marketing studies based on unified technologies, are also planned.

Collective news rubrics, titled "Belarus– Russia: On the Way to Integration" are also being developed within the cooperation framework.

This is not the first Russian-Belarusian mass media project in past months. And the Russian project participants are companies that are friendly towards the official Minsk. Undoubtedly, the Belarusian authorities will actively use Russian partners to propagandize Lukashenko in Russia. However, no one has yet explained the benefit of this recent project or of the TVTs-Bel project of the Russian side.

{Text translated by the Editors}

*Source: Belorussky Partizan; December 13, 2005;
http://www.belaruspartisan.org/index.php?id=20&tx_ttnews%5btt_news%5d=450&tx_ttnews%5bbackPid%5d=13&cHash=308b139a5f*

8. Belarus and Kaliningrad Region Sign Cooperation Program for 2006-2010

The program on mutually beneficial cooperation between the Republic of Belarus and Kaliningrad region for 2006-2010 was signed by prime minister of Belarus Sergei Sidorskiy and governor of Kaliningrad oblast Georgiy Boos in Minsk December 13.

The program envisages transshipment of Belarusian cargos in Kaliningrad ports, deliveries of Belarusian construction materials, interaction in agriculture, deliveries of fish and seafood to Belarus.

The program is expected to increase mutual trade turnover in 2006 up to USD 200 million. "We consider that Kaliningrad region should become one of the most important partners for Belarus taking into account the geographic proximity and ice-free ports as well as friendly relations between the two regions", Georgiy Boos noted.

[Text revised by The Editors]

Source: Belarusian Telegraph Agency: December 13, 2005; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

9. Belarus Confirms Resumption of Joint Venture Talks With Gazprom

Belarusian Economy Minister Nikolai Zaichenko has confirmed that talks with Gazprom on creation of a joint gas venture using Beltransgaz have resumed.

"The joint venture talks with Gazprom have resumed," Zaichenko told reporters on Monday.

Commenting on the existing differences over the assessment of Beltransgaz assets, he said the "the issue will clear up in the course of the talks."

They agreed to an independent valuation of the company's assets, but have not chosen an appraiser yet, Zaichenko said.

The processing of buying back shares from minority shareholders is due to be completed by late December, he said.

Once Belarus has 100% state ownership of Beltransgaz, it will be able to set up a joint venture with Gazprom on a parity basis, he said.

Beltransgaz workers acquired 0.103\$ of the company's authorized stock on preferred terms during privatization. Under a presidential decree, the government must ensure the return of these shares to the state at their nominal value.

The creation of a Beltransgaz-Gazprom joint venture is part of the April 2002 intergovernmental agreement on broader cooperation in the gas industry. / Interfax

Source: Blackenterprises.Com; December 12, 2005; <http://www.blackenterprise.com>

10. Russia's Western Enclave To Boost Trade With Belarus

The Kaliningrad Region, a Russian enclave on the Baltic Sea, could boost trade with Belarus to \$200 million, the region's governor said Monday.

Speaking at a meeting of the Russia-Belarus Council on long-term bilateral cooperation, Georgiy Boos said, "We must reach the figure of \$200 million and then outperform this plan."

The volume of trade between Kaliningrad and Belarus does not currently exceed \$145 million a year. The enclave largely supplies fish, pulp and paper, and cranes to Belarus.

"Cooperation with Belarus is a priority for the Kaliningrad Region. This cooperation is inevitable because it is based on mutual interest," Boos said.

The Kaliningrad governor added that cooperation should also focus on construction.

Source: RIA Novosti, December 12, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

11. Gazprom Chief Justifies Lower Prices For Belarus

Gazprom head Aleksei Miller insisted on 9 December that the company applies market principles to "all foreign partners without exception" including Belarus, Interfax-Belarus reported on 12 December. "General market principles will be applied to Belarus as well. We proved this last year by securing a rise in the prices for gas exports.

I don't think this story has been forgotten in Ukraine either," Miller said. Gazprom, which is seeking to raise prices to European levels for Ukraine and Moldova, said on 6 December that it will continue to supply natural gas to Belarus at the same reduced price as in 2005. Miller justified the discrepancy by saying that Russia and Belarus are in the process of forming a union state and that Belarus is the only country where Gazprom owns the gas main.

Miller added that the company has resumed talks over the Belarusian gas-distribution monopoly Beltransgaz which could give Gazprom control over the country's entire gas-transportation network.

Source: RFE/RL; December 9, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

12. Armenia, Belarus Discuss Military Ties

Belarus's Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev reportedly reaffirmed his country's interest in "mutually beneficial" military cooperation with Armenia at the start of a two-day visit to Yerevan on Monday.

Maltsev met with his Armenian counterpart Serzh Sarkisian and President Robert Kocharian and visited Armenia's main military academy. A statement by Kocharian's office quoted him as praising the "complete mutual understanding" between the two former Soviet republics aligned in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Armenian-Belarusian military ties have "serious potential" and must be deepened, he said.

"The president of the republic noted with satisfaction the effective cooperation between the defense agencies of the two countries and expressed confidence that it will continue," Kocharian's press service said in a statement. The statement said the two sides also discussed "prospects for deepening" military-technical cooperation between their militaries but gave no further details.

That cooperation was also discussed during a separate meeting between Maltsev and Sarkisian. The two men signed a plan of joint defense-related activities for next year later in the day.

Armenia and Belarus are bound by bilateral agreements that allow for mutual arms supplies. The Armenian army, according to some press reports, has already received military hardware from the East European nation whose authoritarian government has been ostracized by the West.

Source: Emil Danielyan, Armenialiberty.Org; December 12; <http://www.armenialiberty.org/>

13. Fradkov OKs Draft Deal On Extending \$146Mln Loan To Belarus

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov has approved a draft intergovernmental agreement on extending a \$146 million loan to Belarus, the Russian government press service reported on Thursday.

Fradkov instructed the Finance Ministry "to hold negotiations with Belarus and, upon reaching an agreement, sign a deal on behalf of the Russian government, with the authority to make amendments of a non-radical nature," the instruction says.

The loan will be extended "to ensure balance in settlements in mutual trade between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus," the draft agreement says.

Source: *Interfax*; December 8, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

INTERNATIONAL

14. Belarus Still Angry Over Waste Repository

Belarus representatives, ignoring arguments by Lithuania, have continued to voice concern over the Baltic state's plans to build a radioactive waste repository close to the border with Belarus, near the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant.

At a farewell meeting with Deputy Parliamentary Speaker Ceslovas Juršenas, outgoing Belarusian Ambassador to Lithuania Vladimir Gorkun said that Belarus, which had been strongly affected by the Chernobyl nuclear power plant catastrophe, reacted very sensitively to these intentions.

Implementation of Lithuania's plans would not contribute to the improvement of relations between the two neighboring countries, Parliament's public relations department reported him as saying.

Source: *The Baltic Times*; December 14, 2005; <http://www.baltictimes.com>

15. Polish Journalist Lawfully Denied Entry to Belarus - Foreign Ministry

Polish journalist Agnieszka Romaszewska was denied entry to Belarus on December 13 on a legal basis, Belarusian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ruslan Yesin told Interfax on Tuesday.

"The actions of Belarusian border guards strictly corresponded with the country's law regulating the crossing of state borders," Yesin said.

"In spite of being denied entry to Belarus once, the Polish citizen once again tried to cross the border," Yesin said. "Such actions on her part are provocative and unfriendly," he said.

Source: *Interfax*; December 13, 2005; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

16. Polish TV Journalist Detained In Belarus

A well-known Polish TV journalist was denied entry into Belarus Tuesday.

Agnieszka Romaszewska of public television station TVP has been detained by Belarusian authorities at the Minsk-2 airport, a spokesman for the station said.

Romaszewska holds the official accreditation of a permanent correspondent with the Belarusian Foreign Ministry.

The journalist is now in the neutral zone of the Minsk-2 international airport.

Romaszewska has contacted the Polish Embassy and is waiting for the Polish consul's arrival.

Belarusian border guards earlier tried to send the journalist back to Warsaw, referring to a law on foreigners' stay in the republic, but failed to produce a deportation order.

On December 10, Romaszewska made an attempt to enter Belarus by car but was not allowed into the country either.

Acting spokesman for the Belarusian Foreign Ministry Ruslan Yesin said Romaszewska had been banned from entering Belarus. "The border guards observed border crossing regulations," he said.

This year, the Polish journalist worked for three months as a TVP correspondent in Belarus, covering the conflict surrounding the Union of Poles in Belarus, an organization that represents the Polish minority in the republic and which the government accuses of inciting unrest.

Yesin described the journalist's repeated attempts to enter the country as a provocation and said the ban was not related to her professional activities. The Foreign Ministry did not annul Romaszewska's accreditation and has nothing against her professional activities, the official said.

Earlier, an aide to the Polish prime minister was denied entry into Belarus.

Source: Leonid Sviridov, RIA Novosti, December 13, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

17. Poland To Ask Belarus To Explain Entrance Denial

12 December 2005 -- Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it will ask the Belarusian ambassador to Warsaw for a formal explanation why an aide to the Polish premier was refused entry to Belarus.

Michal Dworczyk, who advises Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz on the situation of ethnic Poles abroad, said Belarusian border guards turned him away yesterday when he tried to enter the country at Kuznica Bialostocka.

Dworczyk had planned to meet with allies of Anzhelika Borys, the leader of the Union of Poles in Belarus. Authorities in Minsk do not recognize Borys as the legitimate head of the organization.

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka accuses Poland of encouraging Poles in Belarus to oust him from power.

Also today, Prime Minister Marcinkiewicz told the Belapan news agency that the new Polish government is eager to pursue a more active policy on Minsk.

Source: RFE/RL; December 12, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

18. Planned Changes to Belarus Legal Code Could Threaten Basic Freedoms – UN Expert

A United Nations human rights expert has appealed to Belarus not to adopt new provisions for its legal codes that he says could threaten basic freedoms of individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even make it difficult for him to fulfil his mandate.

“These provisions have the potential to severely undermine the rights to freedom of assembly, freedom of association, and freedom of expression of civil society organizations and individuals,” Adrian Severin, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, said in a formal statement released on Friday.

He says changes to the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure of Belarus – on strengthening liability for deeds addressed against persons and public security – incorporates vague definitions and may open the way for arbitrary application of the law.

Besides urging that the provisions not be adopted, he appealed to the Government of Belarus to put an end to ongoing harassment and persecution of human rights defenders and to take all necessary steps to secure the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

The legal changes have been accepted by the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belarus, and will be adopted if the Upper Chamber approves them on second reading on Friday, he said.

Mr. Severin said one new article, on Discrediting the Republic of Belarus, raises a particular concern, since it provides for criminal liability for submitting to international organizations “false information” on the situation in the country.

The proposed amendments could have a negative impact on the co-operation between the UN and NGOs, he said. In that way, they could effectively undermine efforts to fulfil his mandate as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus.

Special Rapporteurs are unpaid experts serving in an independent personal capacity who receive their mandate from the UN Human Rights Commission.

Source: UN News Centre; December 12, 2005; <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=16897&Cr=&Cr1=>

19. IMF Experts Advising Belarus On Inflation Forecasting

A technical assistance mission of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has arrived in Belarus to advise on inflation forecasting.

It will work in the country until Friday, advising experts of the National Bank of Belarus (NBB) on modeling medium-term inflation forecasts and assessing inflationary pressure.

Led by Rudolfo Maino, an economic expert from Argentina, the mission also includes David Mayes of the Bank of Finland and Jaromir Hurnik of the Czech National Bank.

The experts will discuss further assistance to Belarus in assessing inflationary pressure and understanding the transmission mechanism of monetary policy, according to the NBB's press office.

Last February, Belarus withdrew its request for IMF stand-by loans, but the IMF continues to provide consultations on economic issues and technical assistance on monetary, tax and banking policies.

In late 2004, the Fund withdrew its resident representative from the country.

Source: BelaPAN; December 12, 2005; <http://www.belapan.com>

20. Belarus KGB Spies a Threat in Lithuania

Belarus KGB has spotted in the neighboring Lithuania bases of oppositionists ready to act during presidential elections in Belarus, said Viktor Vigera, deputy head of the KGB, preferring not to elaborate on definite whereabouts of the camps.

"The young people of Belarus, including under age, were delivered to a NATO base in Lithuania. And they were trained in shooting there," Vigera said Friday, adding young oppositionists were in Vilnius November 9-11, attending a seminar.

"There were attempts to transfer militant camps to Belarus past summer," deputy head of Belarus KGB specified. "Back in Belarus, those persons tried to arrange similar camps in the Vileisky district, near the towns of Osipovichi and Lunenets. But those attempts were terminated by enforcement bodies," Vigera said quite sure abroad training of militant oppositionists has long been underway.

As to the Belarus opposition, they say the authorities are intentionally scaring the society, the more so that no evidence has been provided. "I know the people who went to the seminar mentioned by Viktor Vigera. They discussed the situation in Belarus; military actions were out of the question," said Alexey Shidlovsky from Zubr organization of oppositional youth.

Source: Kommersant; December 12, 2005; <http://www.kommersant.com>

21. Belarus Keeps Off Polish Premier's Adviser

Michal Dworczyk, an adviser to Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, was not allowed to enter Belarus on Sunday, a representative of the Polish government said.

He said Belarusian border guards asked Dworczyk out from a car, took away his passport and said that he was not allowed entering Belarus.

Dworczyk told TVN24 television channel that Belarusian border guards based at a checkpoint 200 kilometers northeast of Warsaw told him that he was an unwelcome person in Belarus and offered him to go back to Poland.

The adviser and two Polish diplomats were headed for Belarus to meet with representatives of the Polish Union in Belarus, which has about 20,000 members. The Union administration had major differences in summer, which resulted in a split and the election of a new administration. Polish authorities think that the election was illegal and support the previous leaders of the Union. All in all, Belarus has about 400,000 ethnic Polish residents.

The governmental representative said that the Polish Foreign Ministry would find out why the premier's adviser was kept off.

Two Polish diplomats, who were riding the same car with the adviser, were let in.

Source: Itar-Tass; December 11, 2005; <http://www.tass.ru/eng>

22. UN Official Criticizes Belarus Bill

A UN human rights official today raised concerns about freedoms in Belarus due to legal changes that would punish contacts with foreign states and organizations.

Adrian Severin, the UN special rapporteur on Belarus, said the legislation could "severely undermine" fundamental freedoms.

The changes were passed by Belarusian lawmakers on 8 December. They would make it a crime punishable by up to two years in jail to "discredit Belarus" in the eyes of international organizations and foreign governments.

The same jail terms would apply to people convicted of distributing "false information" on the political, economic, social, or international situation of Belarus, or the legal situation of its citizens. The legislation must be signed into law by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Source: RFE/RL; December 9, 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

23. Belarusian President Wants To "Hook" Economy To "Chinese Bulldozer"

Belarusian Television's main newscast on 7 December hyped the political and economic results of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's visit to China on 4-6 December as "unprecedented." Lukashenka said earlier this week that an economic windfall resulting from his visit to China will amount to some \$500 million.

"The main purpose of this visit is to hook our economy to this powerful Chinese bulldozer to make China pull us and the well-being of our people a little bit ahead," Lukashenka told Belarusian journalists in Beijing. "In general, this visit is distinctive by the fact that I came here as to Russia, as to my own home. Russia has never been foreign to us.

We are now building exactly the same relations with China." Meanwhile, the Warsaw-based *Gazeta Wyborcza* reported on 7 December that Lukashenka's trip to China has been completely ignored by China's English-language, international television channel CCTV-9. The daily added

that Chinese President Hu Jintao spoke with Lukashenka in Beijing for one hour, "approximately as long as with the prime minister of Africa's Kingdom of Lesotho the previous day."

Source: RFE/RL; December 8 2005; <http://www.rferl.org>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

24. Lukashenka Sent to Babruysk By the French

"Tanya to University! Luka to Babruysk!" (Babruisk is a small provincial town in Mahiliou region of Belarus) – with such slogans a theatrical demonstration was held on December 2 at the Belarusian embassy in Paris in support of Taciana Khoma, who has been expelled from the Belarus State Economic University for performing public activities.

The organizers tried to give to the Belarusian ambassador a letter signed by a group of French parliamentarians (Martine Billard, Marie-Christine Blandin, Alima Boumediene-Thiery, Yves Cochet, Jean Desessard, Nol Mamere, and Dominique Voynet). However, after lengthy discussions, employees of the Belarusian embassy refused to accept the

The protesters next put on a small performance across from the embassy. A young student created a university building out of a cardboard box, which was then demolished by a person dressed up as Lukashenka wielding a wooden axe.

After that, the young group displayed posters with the words: "Hands off students!" and "Tanya to university! Luka to Babruysk!"

The protest was organized by the Young Greens with the support of other associations.

Source: ZUBR; December 12, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

25. Protest In Support of Freedom of Press

On December 10 by the Communications House in Baranavichy a protest in support of freedom of expression was held. It was dedicated to another anniversary of adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Belarusian Association of Journalists' press service informs. About a dozen of town dwellers lined up by the Communications House holding newspapers *Narodnaya Volya*, *Nasha Niva* and *Tavarysh*, which were excluded from subscription catalogue for the year 2006 recently.

Passers-by were coming to the protesters, asked about the aim of the action and expressed their support to them. After the protest which lasted for 20 minutes, several participants went to the post office to subscribe for the newspaper "Narodnaya Volya". They were told that subscription for this newspaper, as well as for a number of other newspapers, would not be continued. Several citizens expressed their indignation and left their comments in a book of complaints.

Source: Charter97; December 12, 2005; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

26. Zhanna Litvina: "To Light a Candle Is a Duty of Every Citizen"

Chairman of Belarusian association of journalists Zhanna Litvina expressed support to day of Solidarity on December 16.

"At 8 p.m. on December 16 I will lit a candle. And at this moment my thoughts will be not only along with the disappeared opposition leaders but with my colleges Veranica Charkasava and Vasil Grodikau as well. These are two more victims that has no explanations and answers. I am especially worried that profession of journalist is in danger. I think that it is duty of every citizen to light a candle and demand investigation of this tragedies," – said Zhanna Litvina.

Representatives of the civil society of Belarus proposed holding the Day of Solidarity with political prisoners, disappeared oppositionists, their families, and independent journalists, with all who fight for freedom and democracy in Belarus, on the 16th day of every month. Previous Day of Solidarity took place in November. More than 300,000 people have taken part in the action on November 16. On December 16, 2005 at 8 p.m. the Belarusians are to switch off the light in their apartments for 15 minutes again, and to light candles of Freedom in their windows again.

Source: ZUBR; December 12, 2005; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

27. The Court Declined *Narodnaya Volya's* appeals

On December 7 the Committee to Protect Journalists (New York) made an announcement in which it expressed anxiety about the bill that is able to "make any criticism of Aleksandr Lukashenka a reason for imprisonment for a 5 years' term". The bill is entitled "On making amendments and changes in some acts of legislation concerning the toughening of amenability for actions against people and their security".

The chief executive of the CPJ Ann Cooper says that this document will "effectively " criminalize " any criticism of the authorities and will throw Belarus back to the dark time of stalinism". "We call upon the legislature establishment of the Upper Chamber of Parliament to reject the bill", - claimed Ms. Cooper.

Let us remind you that on December 8, in the morning, the Council of the republic of Belarus unanimously praised this bill.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; December 9, 2005; <http://www.baj.ru/>

BUSINESS

28. Belarus Forecasts 7-8.5% GDP Increase In 2006

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko approved the forecast of a 7-8.5% growth in his country's GDP in 2006, the Belarusian economic minister said Monday.

"The parameters are very tense and that is why the difference between the low and the high levels of the forecasted GDP growth is 1.5%," Nikolai Zaichenko said.

He said the estimated production volume in 2006 should increase by 6.5-8%, agriculture by 6-8%. "Today, the country's industry has gained strong momentum, and the capacity of the Russian market, which is the main partner of Belarus, remains high," Zaichenko said.

Source: *RIA Novosti*, December 12, 2005; <http://en.rian.ru>

The Belarus Update is a weekly news bulletin of the International League for Human Rights (www.ilhr.org). The League, now in its 63rd year, is a New York-based human rights NGO in consultative status with the United Nations and the International Labor Organization. To send letters to the Editor or to subscribe/unsubscribe please contact Maria Kabalina at cis@ilhr.org or Olga Tarasov 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.
