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Edited by Maria Kabalina and Olga Tarasov
International League for Human Rights

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DOMESTIC

1. Nearly 1Mn Signatures Collected in Lukashenko's Support

A total of 930,000 signatures have been collected in support of Alexander Lukashenko in his bid for reelection as Belarusian president, sources in the incumbent president's election headquarters told Interfax.

Belarusian election law demands that potential presidential candidates collect no fewer than 100,000 voters' signatures with the assistance of their action groups within a certain period of time and submit these signatures to the Central Election Commission, which has to verify the signatures' authenticity before deciding on whether or not to register them as presidential candidates.

Apart from Lukashenko, another six people have announced plans to run in the presidential elections.

A total of 81,364 signatures had been collected in support of Belarusian opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich by January 10. Milinkevich's supporters said they have no doubts that they will be able to collect the required 100,000 signatures.

Other presidential hopefuls include Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus leader and parliamentary Deputy Sergei Gaidukevich, Gromada social-democratic party leader Alexander Kozulin and Belarusian Popular Front leader Zenon Poznyak.

Source: Interfax; January 11, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

2. Neo-Nazis March in Grodno, Belarus

Around 30 neo-Nazis staged a march in the center of Grodno, Belarus, according to a January 10, 2006 report by the Russian Jewish web site Jewish.ru. The marchers screamed "Heil Hitler!" and insults directed at local anti-fascists as they marched. Several bystanders were beaten before the marchers dispersed upon spotting the police. A local journalist was quoted in the report as saying that neo-Nazis had become much more active in Grodno lately. City police stated that they had no information about the incident.

Source: Union of Councils for Jews in the Former Soviet Union; January 11, 2006; <http://www.fsmonitor.com/stories/011006Belarus.shtml>

3. Belarus Presidential Candidate Pulls out, Calls Election Illegal

One of the candidates for the presidency of Belarus has announced his decision to withdraw from the elections.

Member and an ex-president of the Belarus Academy of Sciences Alexander Voitovich was quoted by RIA-Novosti as saying he did not want to contribute to "create illusions for electors that the participation of (current Belarus president Alexander) Lukashenko in the election is legal and that the election is held in correspondence with the Constitution and the Electoral Code."

The election will take place on March 19. In December 2005 Lukashenko made a request to the Central Election Committee to register an initiative group that would nominate him for president. If he is nominated and wins the elections in March, he will have become president of Belarus for the fourth time.

Voitovich expressed disagreement with the fact that the representatives of independent candidates were not included in the election commissions. No candidate except for the current president has access to the state media, he added.

“The election campaign shows that the situation is the same and there will be no elections, in fact,” Voitovich said.

There are now seven people hoping to become president of Belarus, including Lukashenko and the opposition candidate Alexander Milinkevich.

Lukashenko first became president of Belarus in 1994. After two terms, in 2002, he held a referendum asking the people of Belarus whether they would “allow” him to run for the president for a third time although it was not allowed by the Constitution. The referendum cancelled the constitutional ban on a third term.

Lukashenko is regarded in the West as a suppressor of freedoms and opposition in his country. He has reintroduced Soviet symbols, disbanded parliament, closed independent media and maintained rigid Soviet-style state controls over the economy. Many opposition leaders have been jailed or have disappeared. The Belarusian leader has become a pariah in the West for his intolerance of dissent, and has accused Western governments of aiding opposition groups and seeking his removal. The United States has labelled him “Europe’s last dictator.”

Source: MosNews.Com, January 9, 2006; www.mosnews.com

4. Eight Candidates Seek Belarus Presidency

On December 16, deputies of the Belarusian House of Representatives agreed unanimously that the date of the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus would be March 19. The date took many people by surprise, because it had been widely anticipated both within and outside the country that the election would take place at the end of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's current term, in mid-July. But by moving the date forward, the candidates had just one week to gather a list of members of their initiative groups and deliver it to the Central Commission for Elections and Republican Referendums (CCERR).

There is no consensus within Belarus why the earlier date was chosen. United Civic Party Chairman Anatol Lyabedzka speculates that the Lukashenka regime calculated that the international community would be preoccupied in March with the parliamentary elections in Ukraine (*Narodnaya Volya*, December 29). The announcement followed directly a reportedly successful meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lukashenka at Sochi on December 15 (*Sovetskaya Belorussia*, January 4). Russia is taking up the chair of the Group of Eight industrialized countries and would not wish to do this during a summer Belarusian election that might distract the other G-8 members. Lukashenka has stated that the decision was made by parliament and supported by some opposition deputies (*Sovetskaya Belorussiya*, December 29). By December 28, the CCERR had registered eight initiative groups supporting contenders for the presidency. These include:

Alyaksandr Lukashenka, with 6,212 members

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, with 5,136

Alyaksandr Kazulin, with 3,347

Syarhey Haydukevich, with 3,073

Zyanon Paznyak, with 2,405

Alyaksandr Voytovich, with 1,314

Valery Fralou, with 1,152

Syarhey Skrabets, with 130.

The election procedure is as follows: An inspection of the presidential candidates will take place from December 29 until January 27. According to the Constitution, the president must be a citizen of the country by birth, no less than 35 years of age, and living continuously in Belarus for 10 years without interruption in the period prior to the election. The initiative groups must also gather a minimum of 100,000 signatures for each candidate in order for them to run. Lack of signatures is one of the most common reasons for a candidate to be declared ineligible, as all the signatures have to be verified. If 15% prove to be invalid, then all signatures are discounted. In the past there have also been reported problems with the candidate's official biography or declaration of income. Registration of the candidates is scheduled for February 12-21, after which the real election campaign begins.

The list of candidates to date contains some surprises. Lukashenka and Alyaksandr Milinkevich were expected contenders and amassed impressive numbers for the initiative committees. Syarhey Haydukevich, aged 51, chairman of the Liberal-Democratic Party, is generally believed to be a supporter of the president. He placed a poor third in the 2001 election. The other contenders are all well-known opposition leaders, evidently dissatisfied with the choice of Milinkevich as the single candidate of the opposition.

Voytovich, aged 67, is the former president of the Academy of Sciences of Belarus and a renowned physicist. In 2000, with the support of Lukashenka, he was elected Chairman of the upper house of parliament, but he was dismissed in 2003, ostensibly because he had reached the age for his pension. Subsequently he has been very critical of some government policies. Kazulin is a 50-year-old Minsk native and the chairman of the Social Democratic Party (Hramada). He is also a professor and a doctor of pedagogy who has taught at Moscow Lomonosov State University as well as several institutions in Minsk. Fralou and Skrabets both formed part of the opposition Respublika faction in the former parliament.

The candidacy of Paznyak, 61, the founder of the original Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), and head of the Conservative Christian Party of the BPF, can be considered more disruptive than serious. Paznyak left Belarus in 1996, and has resided in Poland for most of the period since. He was a candidate in the 1994 election, and took part briefly in a mock election in 1999 -- the original end of Lukashenka's first term in office -- but has also called in the past for boycotts of elections. Paznyak appears on paper to be ineligible for candidacy because of his lack of residency. As with the other opposition candidates, his presence serves to undermine the quest for a united opposition.

Elections in Belarus have rarely been on an equal playing field. Lukashenka, as president, has virtually sole access to the media. His campaign manager is Viktor Sheiman, who was been the head of the presidential administration prior to the election announcement. According to surveys by NISEPI, Lukashenka's rating today is around 52% and that of his closest rival Milinkevich, only 6.6%. Another source has stated that Milinkevich's rating after the announcement of the election was 18.1% (Nasha Niva, December 23). The president starts with a big lead, and his supporters dominate both the territorial commissions and the CCERR.

The result appears to be a formality -- another "elegant victory" for Lukashenka, to use the words of CCERR chair Lidziya Yarmoshyna. However, as Lyabedzka points out, the important aspect for the opposition is conducting the political campaign rather than winning, which is impossible under current conditions.

Source: David Marples, The Jamestown Foundation; January 9, 2006; <http://jamestown.org/>

5. Belarus Opposition Vows Protests if Polls Flawed

The main Belarus opposition candidate for president said yesterday that millions of his countrymen would flood the streets in protest if presidential polls on March 19 are not free and fair.

Alexander Milinkevich, an independent, is backed by leading liberal and nationalist opposition parties to challenge incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko, accused by the West of crushing dissent.

Source: Khaleej Times; January 7, 2006; <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/>

6. Industry Officials Arrested In Belarus

Reports from Belarus say a vice director of BelAZ, the country's main car factory, has been arrested and charged with embezzling over \$150,000.

Two other people -- including a Russian national and the Belarusian director of one of the factory's affiliated distributors in Ukraine -- have also been detained on related charges. The identities of the detainees have not been made public.

The Belarusian Interior Ministry said the arrests were made possible thanks to assistance offered by authorities in Ukraine's eastern Dnipropetrovsk region.

Belarusian law-enforcement agencies say they are looking for other suspects.

Source: RFE/RL; January 6, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

7. Presidential Candidate Says Opposition Has Little Chance

Alyaksandr Voytovich, the former head of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences and the leader of the upper chamber of the Belarusian parliament in 2003-04, is registered as an independent candidate in the country's presidential vote in March. Along with seven other contenders -- including the incumbent, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka -- needs to gather 100,000 signatures of support from eligible voters in order to be formally listed on the ballot. Voytovich recently spoke to RFE/RL Belarus Service correspondent Siarhey Navumchyk about the role of the opposition in the upcoming race, and other issues.

RFE/RL: Alyaksandr Voytovich, do you consider yourself as belonging to the Belarusian culture, or to some other culture, like Russian?

Alyaksandr Voytovich: I, of course, consider myself as belonging to the Belarusian culture. I was born in a Belarusian family, one which spoke Belarusian. I have grown up on this territory. I not only agree with, but am also deeply convinced, that only through national self-determination -- different from that of Poland, Russia, or Ukraine -- will we be able to become an important nation in the world.

RFE/RL: Do you think there is a systematic campaign to destroy the Belarusian language in the country, or is it happening more spontaneously?

Voytovich: I really think there is a campaign of destruction of the Belarusian language is underway in Belarus. I think it's being spearheaded by Lukashenka, who said long ago that it's a substandard language. I think the problem is that he was a bad student at school. I think that once Lukashenka's regime is a part of the past, the fate of the Belarusian language will improve radically.

RFE/RL: If you succeed in gathering the 100,000 signatures of support required to be on the ballot, do you plan to then withdraw your candidacy in favor of a united opposition candidate?

Voytovich: Signatures are now being collected and the process is intensifying. I'm considering the question of withdrawing my candidacy. This move would be not in order to support somebody else, but to show that Lukashenka's bid for a third term is not legitimate. I consider his

participation illegitimate. I think, were I to make that move [to withdraw from the race], it would be a statement about the illegitimacy of his participation in the election.

RFE/RL: What is your most powerful weapon against the authorities?

Voytovich: The truth, which is being covered up by the authorities and by the official media, is my most powerful weapon. This truth should be brought to the people. I have to add that the authorities are stealing the future from our children and grandchildren. We must overcome this feeling of fear which rules so many in our country."

RFE/RL: Do you feel you have put yourself at risk by deciding to participate in the election campaign? Are you ready to face that risk?

Voytovich: To begin with, I should say that I am not afraid for myself. I am ready to risk my life. I'm concerned about it, but I'm ready. Secondly, as concerns possible bloodshed on the streets, we should do everything possible to prevent this. It would be terrible if we are divided by blood.

RFE/RL: In your opinion, what are the chances that power might change hands after the election?

Voytovich: Some people may not like it, but I always tell the truth. It's impossible to act otherwise when one is a scientist. That's why I say the possibility that there will be a change in power in three months' time is very low. As I have already said, there will in fact be no real election at all.

Source: RFE/RL; January 6, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

8. Belarus Prohibits Self-Service Sales of Tobacco Products

In 2006 Belarus will ban the self-service sales of tobacco products, i.e. when a customer has a direct access to this kind of goods. The measure is stipulated in the plan of actions to implement the WTO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, chief of the public health department of the republican center of hygiene, epidemiology and public health Andrei Sekach told BelTA.

According to the plan for 2007-2008, Belarus is due to bar radio and TV tobacco ads. By 2010 the ban will be placed on advertising and other actions aimed at promoting cigarettes sales.

Next year the country's medical establishments will offer a new service – consultations and medical help for those who are eager to give up smoking. The universities will offer an optional course in smoking prevention for students majoring in pedagogics, social pedagogics and psychology.

Besides, during 2006-2008 the country is set to amend the state standards on tobacco packing and labelling. This year the country will toughen the accountability for illegal tobacco imports, transit, storage and sales by juridical entities and individual entrepreneurs.

The plan of actions to honour the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control will be implemented by a number of ministries and agencies /healthcare, education, information, culture, trade, interior, emergencies, sports and tourism, taxes and duties ministries, the concern Belgospisheprom, the State Customs Committee/.

The plan of actions has been worked out in line with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Belarus, alongside other 100 states, ratified the international document in June 2005.

Tougher measures on tobacco control have been introduced in view of a rapid spread of tobacco dependence and its negative impact on health. In Belarus every third smokes /about 34 per cent/. Smoking men account for 57 per cent of the total while women - for 15 per cent. Every year tobacco-related diseases claim lives of 15,5 thousand Belarusians. According to the WHO, every

year smoking kills 4,9 million people worldwide. By 2030 this figure would double – up to 10 million people per year. Smoking-related pathologies would top the list of fatal diseases among adults.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; January 5, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

REGIONAL

9. Belarusians Able To Vote in Russia

According to the Embassy of Belarus in Russia, four electoral districts will be opened in Russia for the presidential election.

The district electoral commissions are to be created in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kaliningrad and Krasnodar prior to January 31.

All Belarusian citizens registered with the Embassy will receive personal invitations specifying the time and location of the poll.

Currently there are 12,137 Belarusian citizens registered with the Embassy of Belarus in Russia.

[Text translated by the Editors]

Source: RIA Novosti, January 11, 2006; <http://rian.ru>

10. Putin Introduced Unified Migration Card with Belarus

According to the Russian presidential press service, Vladimir Putin signed the law on ratifying the agreement with Belarus regarding the use of a unified format migration card.

[Text translated by the Editors]

Source: Gazeta.Ru; January 11, 2006; <http://www.gazeta.ru/>

11. Regional Security Union Key Defense for Belarus - Lukashenko

The president of Belarus said Wednesday that the regional security organization of former Soviet republics, of which Belarus is a member, was a major defense against pressure from Western nations.

Addressing a conference on Belarus' policy towards integration with former Soviet republics, Alexander Lukashenko praised the performance of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

Lukashenko said: "Cooperation within the CSTO is becoming an important tool providing national security, given Belarus' difficult situation amid threats and pressure from the West."

Lukashenko said he was sorry that regional integration organizations still had work to do to strengthen their effectiveness.

"The CSTO falls short of being an effective security organization, and its foreign policy needs better coordination," Lukashenko said.

"Some member countries decide to deploy U.S. and NATO forces on their territory without consulting their CSTO partners," the Belarusian leader said, in a thinly veiled reference to Kyrgyzstan renting its Manas airport to the United States for its military operations in Afghanistan.

Source: RIA Novosti, January 11, 2006; <http://en.rian.ru>

12. Former Ambassador to Lithuania To Become Belarusian Representative in CIS

The Belarusian government submitted to the CIS Executive Committee the candidacy of Vladimir Garkun, the former Belarusian Ambassador to Lithuania, to the position of the First Deputy Executive Secretary of CIS.

According to the state apparatus, the proposal was submitted by the Belarusian side on January 6.

"The approval of the Belarusian proposal by Vladimir Rushailo, the Executive Secretary, is pending. However, it is the so-called Belarusian quota, so we are not expecting any hidden dangers," according to a source. The Belarusian side expects that the approval will be made as soon as "Christmas holidays are over in Russia," the source in the apparatus said.

Garkun was released from the post of the Ambassador of Belarus in Lithuania on January 3. Before the diplomatic post he worked as the Vice Premier in the Belarusian government.

[Text translated by the Editors]

Source: Interfax; January 9, 2006; www.interfax.ru

13. Russia's Gazprom to Increase Gas Supplies to Europe via Belarus

Russia and Belarus have agreed to increase gas transit levels to Europe.

During negotiations between Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and deputy head of Russia's gas giant Gazprom, Alexander Medvedev, the two countries agreed to set up a working group to discuss joint projects, which include underground gas storage facilities in Belarus and expanding its transit capacity for Russian gas supplies to Europe, ITAR-TASS news agency reported. The storage facilities area could be expanded by up to one billion cubic meters.

Gazprom provides about half the gas consumed in the European Union and 80 percent of that amount is sent through pipelines that cross Ukraine.

The announcement of the agreement came four days after Russia and Ukraine ended a bitter, months-long dispute over gas supply. While the price of Russian gas for Ukraine has increased, Belarus will receive Russian gas at the same price as in 2005.

Russia and Belarus have outlined plans to unite into one state and already make use of common economic and finance standards. Gazprom also owns the Belarusian part of the pipeline from the Russian deposit at the Yamal peninsula to Europe that transports over 50 percent of Russian gas exports through Belarus. In 2005 the two countries resumed negotiations to establish a joint enterprise on the basis of Belarus' Beltransgaz to direct the Belarusian gas transport system.

Source: MosNews.Com, January 9, 2006; www.mosnews.com

14. Russia, Belarus Set to Sign Agreements On Equal Rights in 2006

Russia and Belarus will sign several agreements guaranteeing equal rights for the citizens of both countries, a senior Russian diplomat said Thursday.

"During a meeting of the Supreme State Council, scheduled for the beginning of 2006, the parties will sign a number of agreements guaranteeing equal rights for the Russian and Belarus citizens," Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said.

According to the diplomat, the agreements guarantee equal rights in the spheres of social security, medical assistance, taxation and choice of residence.

"We are also planning to sign an agreement establishing well-defined legal norms for the management of joint property accumulated through the formation of the unified state," Karasin said.

The diplomat added that Supreme State Council would also discuss all key aspects of bilateral relations, including issues related to the introduction of the Russian ruble as a local currency in Belarus.

Source: Natalia Belova, RIA Novosti; January 5, 2006; <http://en.rian.ru>

15. Putin Blesses Europe's Last Dictator

When Aleksandr Lukashenko, the authoritarian ruler of the former Soviet republic of Belarus, met Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin leader's Black Sea residence shortly before Christmas, there was no disguising the Russian president's influence over his erratic neighbor.

While Putin appeared relaxed as they made small talk for the television cameras in an oak-panelled reception room, the man described as Europe's last dictator was clearly impatient to be left alone with his host.

"There are some questions but I would like to discuss them privately," said Lukashenko, 51, before the cameramen were ushered out.

"A presidential election is ahead of us. You know what is going on with regard to our country. I want to inform you in this respect and you promised to tell me something."

Less than a day after the two men's encounter — their eighth last year — Lukashenko, who has ruled his impoverished country with an iron fist since 1994, announced that he was bringing forward the presidential election by nearly six months to March 19.

The move — evidently made with Putin's blessing — has been denounced as illegal by Belarus's embattled opposition, which claims that it does not have enough time to prepare.

Putin's support has not been confined to words: he has provided Belarus with cheap oil and gas, generous loans and political and moral support.

The motivation is clear: Putin is afraid of a repetition of Ukraine's orange revolution just over a year ago, which brought Viktor Yushchenko, the pro-western presidential candidate, to power instead of a rival preferred by the Kremlin.

"Lukashenko's regime would probably have collapsed a long time ago were it not for Putin's support," said Andrei Zaytsev, an expert on relations between the two countries. "The last thing Putin wants is for Belarus to start leaning towards NATO."

The row between Moscow and Kiev, which erupted after Russia cut off Ukraine's gas supply last weekend in a dispute over prices, has highlighted Putin's pivotal relationship with former Soviet republics.

The gas was turned back on after a compromise was found but Putin, who has deplored the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 as "the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the 20th century", had made his point: Russia is prepared to use its economic might to impose its will on former Soviet republics.

Significantly, Putin allowed Gazprom, the state-controlled gas company, to take a tough line against Ukraine on the day Russia took over the chairmanship of the G8 group of industrialized nations, provoking criticism from fellow members.

Putin's policy towards the elections in Belarus, a country of 10m people, is expected to be a further cause of friction with the West. Since coming to power, Lukashenko, the former boss of a collective farm, has reintroduced Soviet symbols, closed down the independent media and asserted rigid state control over the economy.

Many opposition leaders have been jailed or have disappeared. The feared secret police retains its Soviet era name of KGB and most of its communist era powers. Poking fun at the president in public is an offence punishable by up to two years in jail.

European leaders have made little secret of their distaste for Lukashenko and have threatened to impose sanctions on his regime unless the elections are free and fair. Condoleezza Rice, the American secretary of state, has accused him of turning his country into one of the world's six outposts of tyranny — alongside Iran, North Korea, Burma, Cuba and Zimbabwe.

"I don't see how a clash over Lukashenko can be avoided," said one western diplomat. "Putin claims to be in favor of democracy but he is far too close to the Belarusian regime. It makes the West very uneasy."

Ukraine is due to hold parliamentary elections the week after the vote in Belarus. The poll has acquired greater significance since a change in the Ukrainian constitution on January 1 gave parliament, rather than the president, the right to appoint the prime minister.

Analysts said the Kremlin's hard line in the gas dispute was intended to strengthen Viktor Yanukovich, the candidate defeated by Yushchenko. Yanukovich has argued for Russia and Belarus to unite and form a Slavic counterweight to America and the European Union. Putin's ploy backfired as Ukrainians rallied around their president. But Yanukovich's party is expected to emerge as the strongest force in parliament.

"There is no question that Putin and the Kremlin want the elections to weaken Yushchenko as punishment for the orange revolution," said Ivan Lozowy, a Kiev lawyer and civil activist. "To have Yanukovich as prime minister, especially now the post has greater powers, and Yushchenko as a lame duck would be a huge victory for the Kremlin."

Putin is using Russia's clout to expand its influence elsewhere in its back yard. Moscow cut off gas supplies last week to Moldova, the former Soviet state bordering Romania that is adopting a more pro-western line, in another row over prices. Ukraine has stepped in to help.

"Putin deplores the end of Soviet power," said the western diplomat. "Meddling in elections, supporting dictators, cracking down on the opposition — it's all part of one strategy: making Russia a power with influence well beyond its borders."

Rule of iron

- In 1995 Lukashenko ordered the shooting down of a hot air balloon that drifted into Belarusian airspace, killing its American pilot
- In 1998 he told several foreign ambassadors to leave their residences and cut off the water and electricity when they refused to go
- Last year he banned the use of foreign models from billboards and ruled 75% of music on radio should be Belarusian
- Insulting Lukashenko, even in a joke, is punishable with up to two years in jail

Source: Mark Franchetti, Times Newspapers; January 8, 2006; <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/>

16. Moscow To Build Representative Office, Trade House in Minsk

A representative office and a trade house of Moscow will be built in Minsk, Minsk deputy mayor Vycheslav Kushner told BelTA.

In his words, the Moscow's representative office will be situated in Osvobozhdeniya Street next to Moscow-Minsk bank.

"All the work — design work and construction — will be done by the Moscow party. On our part we will create conditions to make the first two stages happen fast", said Vycheslav Kushner.

Let us remind you, the negotiations to open a representative office of the Russian capital have been underway for around one year. The issue was tabled by a Gomel sitting of the Belarus-Moscow Business Co-operation Council on August 18-19. Then negotiations were resumed during the first Belarusian-Russian Economic Forum in Minsk on September 6-9.

As far as the Moscow trade house is concerned, it will be placed in Pobediteley Avenue not far from the XXI Century business centre. The land plot has been stripped of all buildings. The trade house is planned to include administrative, business and trade centres, added the Minsk deputy mayor.

Source: Belarusian Telegraph Agency; January 6, 2006; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

INTERNATIONAL

17. Human Rights Situation In Belarus Deteriorating, Says UN

A United Nations official has said that the human rights situation in Belarus is deteriorating ahead of the country's presidential election in March.

Adrian Severin, the UN human rights rapporteurs on Belarus, said that the country is moving toward a "more and more totalitarian system." He listed several examples of a fresh crackdown on the opposition, including a new law that makes it a crime to voice criticism of the government.

Severin made the comments in Brussels on 11 January after meeting with the European Union's top human rights expert, Michael Matthiessen. Both men have been denied visas to visit Belarus.

Severin is due to present a new report on Belarus to the UN Human Rights Commission in March.

Source: RFE/RL; January 11, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

18. Russian Delegation To Insist on Special Status for Belarus at PACE

The Russian delegation to the winter session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), due to open in Strasbourg on January 23, are to insist on Belarus being awarded the status of special guest, delegation head and chairman of the Duma International Affairs' Committee Konstantin Kosachyov has said.

"We believe that the international isolation of Belarus is counterproductive and we will work for reducing it so that Belarusian representatives will be able to attend the PACE session as special guests," he told Interfax.

Belarus is the only European country absent from the 46-nation Council of Europe, Kosachyov said.

Source: Interfax; January 11, 2006; <http://www.interfax.ru/e>

19. Belarus Opposition Candidate Holds Talks In France

The united opposition's candidate in Belarus's presidential election campaign has held talks with France's foreign minister in Paris.

Alyaksandr Milinkevich met on 9 January with Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy. Ahead of the meeting, France's Foreign Ministry said Douste-Blazy and Milinkevich were expected to discuss human rights and political freedoms in Belarus.

French spokesman Jean-Baptiste Mattei described the human rights situation in Belarus as worsening, with increased repression of the opposition press, in the run-up to the 19 March presidential poll, in which President Alyaksandr Lukashenka is seeking a third term.

On 9 January in Belarus, Alyaksandr Voytovich who had been running as an independent candidate, announced he was dropping out of the presidential race because he views it as illegitimate.

The remaining candidates each need to gather 100,000 signatures of support from eligible voters in order to be officially added to the ballot.

Source: RFE/RL; January 10, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

20. "Democracy Balloons" to Belarus

One thousand colored balloons will soar to Belarus from Bialystok, northeast Poland next Monday in support of democratic change in the country, the Polish branch of the Robert Schuman Foundation announced Tuesday.

More balloons will be sent to Belarus on February 16 and March 16, shortly before the close of Belarus's presidential campaign.

Schuman Foundation head Piotr Nowina-Konopka stressed the importance of European support for Belarus.

This idea, which originated in Poland, is now becoming European. [Belarusian president - PAP] Lukashenka must realize that his conflict is with entire civilized Europe. The balloons will be filled with the wind of freedom, a wind that rarely blows in Belarus, Nowina-Konopka said.

Source: Polskiej Agencji Prasowej; January 10, 2006; <http://euro.pap.net.pl/cgi-bin/europap.pl?grupa=46&dzien=0&ID=75449>

21. Belarusian Opposition Candidate Meets With Polish Premier

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the Belarusian united opposition candidate for the presidential election on 19 March, met with Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz in Bialystok, northeastern Poland, on 6 January, PAP and Belapan reported. Marcinkiewicz said Warsaw wants to support Belarus by launching a radio station and by sending observers for the presidential election. Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Anna Fotyga said the previous day in the Senate that within the next two months the government will open a radio station to broadcast to Belarus.

Fotyga added that the station, financed from NGO and government funds, will broadcast in Belarusian and Polish and address its programs primarily to Belarus' Polish minority. Warsaw-based "Gazeta Wyborcza" wrote on 7 January that the station will be available on the ultrahigh-

and medium-frequency bands. The daily added that the station's UHF signal is to be receivable in most localities in the western part of Belarus.

Source: RFE/RL; January 9, 2006; <http://www.rferl.org>

22. Independent Broadcasts to Belarus Will Soon Begin

An independent radio station broadcasting from Poland to neighboring Belarus will be launched within weeks, Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz has declared during a joint press conference with Alexander Milinkevich, the Belarus opposition's candidate in the March presidential election. In August Poland earmarked 237 euro to help set up the radio station.

Relations between Poland and the regime of long-time President Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, its eastern neighbor, are highly strained. The authorities in Minsk last year accused the Union of Poles in Belarus of fomenting a revolution there. Warsaw intervened in the dispute, which led to a series of tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats from the two countries.

Source: Polskie Radio, January 7, 2006; <http://www.radio.com.pl/polonia>

23. Algeria Discussed Huge Deal With Belarus

Algeria has been discussing the prospect of a \$1.5 billion arms deal with Belarus.

Algeria's Defense Ministry has been examining the purchase of the MiG-29 aircraft of Belarus. Algerian defense sources said Belarus has offered a lower price for the aircraft than that of Russia.

So far, Belarus Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev held talks with Algerian defense and military commanders during a recent visit to the North African state. Algerian sources said the June 2005 visit could pave the way for wide-ranging military and defense cooperation between the two countries.

"Belarus offered everything," an Algerian defense source said. "They are ready to train, provide expertise for weapons development and production and sell us a range of platforms."

*Source: Middle East Newslines; January 7, 2005:
http://www.menewslines.com/stories/2006/january/01_08_3.html*

24. UNDP Performs USD 7 million Worth of Projects in Belarus in 2005

The year of 2005 was successful for the UN Development Program /UNDP/ in Belarus. As director of the information department of the UN representative office in Belarus Viktor Radivinovskiy told BelTA, the annual amount of funds used on different projects totaled USD 7,3 million reaching the highest record from 1992. For instance, in 2004 this figure was USD 3 million.

Some 20 UNDP projects were underway last year. Among them were the programs on rendering assistance to the Belarusian government in working out the national strategy of the sustainable socio-economic development for 2010, on extending the use of biomass in the energy production and on combating trafficking in women and illegal drugs turnover. Special attention was paid to the projects on small and middle-scale business development.

According to him, the most important event of 2005 was the launch of the 2-year joint program on enhancing the border management in the Republic of Belarus /BOMBEL/ between the European Union, the UNDP and the State Border Troops Committee of Belarus. The draft touches upon the activity of the border troops in fight against the trans-boundary organized crime, terrorism, illegal migration, forgery of documents and illegal transportation of radioactive and nuclear materials. The program aims to set up an up-to-date infrastructure, hone the border control and develop a cynology center at Smorgon border troops unit.

Referring to the to-do list for 2006, Viktor Radivinovskiy has noted that the UNDP intends to continue the ongoing Belarusian projects and to utilize no less than USD 10 million. The specialist has said that the UNDP will focus on cooperation in the fight on HIV/AIDS, Belarusian-Ukrainian-Moldavian program against illegal drugs traffic. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) will operate in three priority fields: early child's development, invigoration of health among the youth and protection of rights of children.

Source: The National Centre of Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus; January 6, 2006; <http://law.by/work/Eng/>

25. U.S. Envoy Sees "Dismal Scenario" for Belarus Election

Ambassador George Krol says situation for opposition "very difficult"

The prospects for a free and fair presidential election in Belarus March 19 are dismal, according to George Krol, the U.S. ambassador to Belarus.

Krol painted a grim picture for journalists in Washington January 4 about conditions inside a country Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has called "Europe's last dictatorship" on the eve of a crucial election campaign. In the election, Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko is running for a third six-year term. Key opposition leaders are imprisoned and Lukashenko opponents also risk violating a new law if they criticize the government.

Ambassador Krol declined to be drawn into a discussion about what the United States may do should the Belarusian elections prove a sham but he warned that Belarus "will not be able to enjoy a robust cooperative relationship with the United States and the [European Union] if it maintains this kind of system."

"Despite what may be a dismal scenario in which the alternative views are not being given the freedom by the authorities in accordance with the Belarusian Constitution to be presented freely to the population – which is all part of the political process and should be part of the political process – nevertheless, the people that are in politics and hoping to run are actively engaging people and getting out there and trying the best they can ... even though the overall scenario is very difficult," said Krol.

Democracy is not just a matter of counting the votes on Election Day but of allowing a political process, he said. And the crucial issue is whether the population will be allowed to learn about the opposition's message.

In speaking out, Krol was fulfilling Secretary Rice's pledge that the United States would "shine a spotlight on places where people are still denied freedom."

In April 2005, while visiting Vilnius, Lithuania, Rice met several members of Belarusian civil society. She said afterwards that the United States "will always support ... the evolution of democratic processes around the world and the desire of people to tap into the aspirations of their populations for freedom. And we will support the idea that elections, when they are held, should be real elections. They should not be sham elections and the international community ought to be prepared and ready to help Belarus to carry out free and fair elections in 2006."

In May 12, 2005, congressional testimony Rice said it is necessary "to stand with people in places like Belarus ... to let them know that, at least, the United States is with them." Despite frequent international criticism, the Belarusian government has taken the path of repression, according to Krol. Independent media have been shut down. Several opposition leaders have been imprisoned. A new Belarusian law criminalizing acts "discrediting Belarus abroad" came into effect December 30, 2005. "A sense of insecurity and fear" reigns in Belarus, Krol said.

While all of the other former Soviet republics have moved towards greater economic freedom, Belarus has made little progress on economic reform and market liberalization and stills ranks among the most repressed countries economically in the world.

The United States has criticized these moves both diplomatically and publicly. Diplomatically, Krol said, he has communicated U.S. concerns about repression and the lack of a free and fair election campaign to the Belarusian government. He also has aired these concerns publicly in Belarus, he said, but the state-controlled media has not reported his remarks.

In the United States, the U.S. Congress passed and President Bush signed into law the Belarus Democracy Act in October 2004. Passed unanimously by both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, the law provides assistance for Belarusian political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and independent media while prohibiting U.S. government agencies from providing loans and investment to the Belarus government, except for humanitarian goods.

The law was enacted in response to the Lukashenko regime's holding a referendum that eliminated constitutional limits on his term in office, which allowed him to run in the upcoming election. The referendum campaign and concurrent parliamentary elections, President Bush said when signing the law, "were conducted in a climate of abuse and fear. [the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] and other observers have determined that this victory was achieved by fraudulent means."

"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," said Bush.

Source: Jeffrey Thomas, Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State; January 5, 2006. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>

26. Belarus Advocates Visa-Free Procedures with EU

For Belarus, trade and economic cooperation with EU is the obvious highlight of its foreign policy, Interfax reported referring to the 2006-2010 program of social and economic advance of that country.

"Promoting integration ties with the countries outside CIS will be targeted at completing the entry into the WTO, bolstering cooperation with IMF, World Bank, IFC, EBRD," the program says. "The purpose is to raise loans, attract engineering support to solve burning issues of economy's advance as well as to deepen cooperation with EU.

Trade and economic cooperation with new members of the European Union is in the center of attention of the program, first of all because of "their geographic vicinity and established ties that are mutually beneficial and based on mutual interests." Another highlight is "declining discriminatory actions, lifting trade limits in respect of Belarus goods."

What's more, as if ignoring the general attitude of Europe towards Belarus, the program calls for establishing "common European economic area" and for introducing the visa-free procedures between Belarus and EU in the long view.

It was only in September 2005, when the European Parliament passed a special resolution on Belarus, which condemned repressive actions taken in the country against the Union of Belarus Poles and never-ending persecution of activists standing for the rights of the Polish minority there.

Moreover, Brussels has been continuously criticizing Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, blaming violation of democracy and freedom of speech on him. Lukashenko and some of top-

ranked officials of the country were even recommended to pay no visits to the member states of EU.

Source: *Kommersant*; January 5, 2006; <http://www.kommersant.com>

HUMAN RIGHTS & INDEPENDENT MEDIA

27. Ideologists Interfere With the Work of Independent Media

On January 9 the editor-in-chief of the independent socio-political newspaper *Vitsebskij Kurjer* Uladzimir Bazan was summoned for a conversation to the head of ideology department of Vitsebsk regional executive committee Mikhail Kuzmich. The official has expressed discontent over the titles of the texts, viewing them as negative. When Uladzimir Bazan noted that state-owned monopolies Belposhta and Belsajuzdruk has blocked dissemination of *Vitsebskij Kurjer*, answered that these are internal problems of the three economic entities, and they should settle them themselves.

Vitsebskij Kurjer is the only independent socio-political newspaper in this city.

Last year the newspaper received the Gerd Bucerius Prize "Eastern Europe's Young Press", established by the foundation of German weekly *Zeit*. However, there were not less problems for *Vitsebskij Kurjer* after that, but other way around. At the moment the newspaper is on the verge of closure.

In 2006 *Vitsebskij Kurjer*, as many other independent newspapers of Belarus, are not distributed via kiosks of the Belsajuzdruk. The newspaper is also denied a possibility to carry out subscription.

Source: *Charter97*; January 11, 2006; <http://www.charter97.org/eng/>

28. The Court Refused To Change The Measure of Detention For Anton Filimonau

On January 10 Pershamaiski District Court of Minsk rejected the claim of Uladzimir Myaleshka. He asked to change the measure of detention for his grandson Anton Filimonau, the son of Veranika Charkasava, a journalist who was murdered in October 2004. (Uladzimir Myaleshka is a legal representative of the 16-year-old youth). According to Anton's grandmother Diana Charkasava, they are going to appeal this decision.

At the moment Anton Filimonau is in the confinement cell in Valadarskaga Street in Minsk. He was detained on December 27 as a suspect in the case of counterfeiting of Belarusian money. Several 5 and 10 thousand banknotes were taken away from him and four his acquaintances. A criminal case against them was started according to art. 221 of the Criminal Code of Belarus. They had to spend 3 days in the confinement cell. On December 30 they were released and only Anton had to stay.

On January 6 Diana Charkasava and Uladzimir Myaleshka gave a press-conference in Minsk. They claimed that their grandson was constantly being persuaded to confess that he had killed his mother.

Source: *Belarusian Association of Journalists*; January 10, 2006; <http://www.baj.ru/>

29. Representative of Executive Committee Demands To Punish Participant of Day of Solidarity

Trial against participant of Day of Solidarity on December 16 activist of "Young Front" Siarzhuk Marchyk will take place in Baranavichi tomorrow.

January 4 Marchyk was detained in his flat and taken to police department. There they compiled protocol against him for participation in street action on Day of solidarity on December 16. Police officers said that they learned of his participation in the action from publication in local newspaper.

Several days ago policemen demonstrated document signed by depute chairman of Baranavichi executive committee Dzmitry Kastsukevich. The official demands to use administrative measures of punishment against Marchyk.

If you want to express to Mr. Kastsukevich your attitude to his actions, please call +375 163 41-23-08.

Source: ZUBR; January 11, 2006; <http://www.zubr-belarus.com/>

30. Police Seize Second Print Run This Month of Opposition Daily

Police have seized the entire print run of Belarus' largest opposition daily for the second time this month, the paper said today. *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will), which has been harassed by authorities for criticizing President Aleksandr Lukashenko, lost all 30,000 copies on January 9.

The paper has been forced to print in the Russian city of Smolensk since October 2005 when local companies refused to print it on what *Narodnaya Volya* said were the orders of the Information Ministry. Border police in the northeastern Vitebsk region confiscated a shipment of 27,000 copies from Russia on January 3. The police released them a day later.

"We are experiencing a difficult start to the new year," said Svetlana Kalinkina, deputy editor of *Narodnaya Volya* and a 2004 recipient of the Committee to Protect Journalists International Press Freedom Award. "Authorities are staging a virtual blockade to prevent the paper from reaching its readers in Belarus," she told CPJ.

The latest issue which was seized contained critical reporting on government pressure on opposition candidates campaigning for a presidential election scheduled for March 2006.

"We are outraged at this overt pressure on *Narodnaya Volya* and call on Belarusian authorities to stop harassing the paper," CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper said.

At the start of 2006 the post office stopped distributing *Narodnaya Volya* which is banned from sale at newsstands. Staff now sells the paper at its Minsk newsroom and volunteers deliver copies to subscribers.

Kalinkina said banks refuse to accept deposits into the paper's account from would-be readers trying to pay for a subscription. In December 2005, 180 residents of Soligorst in Minsk region signed a petition demanding that *Narodnaya Volya* be allowed to go on sale at newsstands and be distributed through the regular mail. On January 6, 2006, Soligorsk police started visiting signatories at their homes demanding an explanation of why they supported the paper, the Belarusian service of the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported.

"It is shocking that Belarus' largest opposition newspaper is forced to resort to underground distribution methods reminiscent of the darkest days of Soviet oppression," said CPJ's Cooper. "This is doubly disturbing in the run-up to presidential elections when readers need alternative sources of information."

Source: Committee to Protect Journalists, January 10, 2006; <http://www.cpj.org/news/2006/europe/belarus10jan06na.html>

31. Baptists Demand End to "Persecution" of Family

The congregation of a Baptist Church in Bobruisk, in eastern Belarus, has called for an end to the "persecution" of members of the Yermalitsky family, who host the church's services in their home. The family has faced a series of fines and other harassment from state officials, much of which has been personally orchestrated by Aleksandr Markachev of the town administration. Markachev has defended his actions to Forum 18 News Service, claiming that "a private home is not designated for religious worship," and that "their services are illegal." He also alleged that the church services caused the risk of a fire and health problems, but dismissed Forum 18's suggestions that if church members believed they were at risk of fire or health problems they could choose not to attend. The congregation has also called for worship services to be allowed to take place freely, and the cancellation of fines imposed on the Yermalitsky family.

An official of the town administration of Bobruisk [Babruysk] in Mogilev [Mahilyow] region in eastern Belarus, has defended a series of fines imposed on a Baptist family which hosts a church in its home, in the latest in a series of escalating moves against the Yermalitsky family. "A private home is not designated for religious worship," Aleksandr Markachev told Forum 18 News Service from Bobruisk on 5 January. "Their services are illegal as they refuse to register their church and abide by the law." The congregation, like other congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches, refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries.

Markachev, who has personally led much of the harassment of the congregation, insists that the church must comply with the religion law, which against international human rights standards makes registration compulsory. He also alleged that church services in his home risked causing a fire and health problems. Markachev dismissed suggestions that if church members believed they were at risk of fire or health problems they could choose not to attend.

However, Markachev denied that the authorities are restricting the rights of the church members, insisting that he maintains "excellent relations" with the church's pastor, Aleksandr Yermalitsky.

While refusing to discuss the specifics of successive fines on the Yermalitsky family on the grounds that "the courts are independent", he insisted the authorities are right to bring the family "to responsibility". Asked what the authorities will do when the church continues to worship, as it has promised to do, Markachev said further legal cases will be inevitable. He rejected absolutely all suggestions that church members' rights to profess their faith freely are being violated, insisting that a number of registered churches exist locally that believers could attend.

Pastor Yermalitsky was reluctant to discuss the pressure on his church. "We're going to take our complaints to the procuracy here and the courts," he told Forum 18 from Bobruisk on 5 January. "We want to resolve these problems here at home."

The Yermalitsky family in Bobruisk has long faced pressure for its religious activity. After religious literature he was displaying at a street library was confiscated in September 2005, Aleksandr Yermalitsky was summoned to a meeting with Markachev at the town administration, where the official insisted that Pastor Yermalitsky register the church. The Baptists told Forum 18 that Markachev threatened to use all "levers" at his disposal to "close down" the house where the church meets, which is also where the family lives.

On 21 November the Lenin district court of Bobruisk fined Yermalitsky 145,000 Belarusian Rubles (442 Norwegian Kroner, 56 Euros, or 67 US Dollars) under Article 193 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which punishes founding and leading an unregistered religious congregation. However, on 25 November the case was cancelled, and two days later the confiscated literature was returned.

In the evening of 25 November, as a prayer meeting was underway, Markachev led a nine-strong group of town officials and police in an inspection of the Yermalitsky's home. Among the officials were a Fire Inspector, a member of the Commission for Children, a doctor from the Hygiene Service, the Education Department and the local police officer. Those attending the prayer

meeting were detained for an hour. On 28 November, in the wake of the raid, Yermalitsky's wife Lyudmila was summoned to the Hygiene and Epidemiological Centre "for verification of the technical conditions". An official of the Emergencies Service visited the house the following day. Late on 1 December the basement of the house was broken into and items stolen.

Markachev of the town administration again summoned Yermalitsky on 6 December to a meeting also attended by Mikhail Kovalevich, deputy head of the town administration, who the Baptists accuse of being "the main inspirer" of the harassment they have faced. Yermalitsky was again threatened at the meeting that things would "end badly" for him if the church continues to violate the law. The following day Markachev and five other officials again visited the Yermalitsky home for an alleged "fire inspection". When the family protested that such an inspection had already been carried out on 29 November, officials maintained that had been "insufficient".

On 12 December, Yermalitsky was summoned to the Emergency Situation Department where Senior Inspector Yuri Migas fined him administratively 28,000 Belarusian Rubles (85 Norwegian Kroner, 11 Euros or 13 US Dollars) for allowing his house to be remodelled for use as a place of worship without approval of the plans.

The following day, the pastor was summoned to the police, where Senior Lieutenant A. Malakhov warned him that the church had to register according to the demands of the religion law. Another police officer warned him: "Either you register or the church will not be allowed to exist at this address."

On 27 December, Lyudmila Yermalitskaya was fined 580,000 Belarusian Rubles (1,767 Norwegian Kroner, 223 Euros or 270 US dollars) under Article 167 part 1 of the administrative code, which punishes violations of the law on religious and other gatherings with fines of up to 150 times the minimum monthly wage or imprisonment of up to 15 days. Officials claim that children were present "against their will" and "in the absence of their parents", something banned by the country's religion law. The average wage in Belarus is estimated to be between 100 and 150 US Dollars per month.

Markachev of the town administration insisted to Forum 18 that nine children had been present without their parents during the service raided on 25 November. Repeatedly asked by Forum 18 whether these children had been present without the knowledge of their parents and against their wishes, he declined to answer.

Church members claim "suspicious vehicles" are regularly outside the house. In a 1 January 2006 statement, they call for appeals for their congregation to be able to meet freely for worship, an end to the "persecution" of the Yermalitsky family and the cancellation of the fines.

Source: Felix Corley, Forum 18: January 6, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

32. Belarus KGB Pressures Local Opposition, Tries Recruiting Agents

Belarus State Security Committee - the KGB, is increasing pressure on the local opposition forces before the upcoming elections. In the city of Zhodzina Members of the youth organizations, collecting signatures for nomination of Aleksander Milinkevich as oppositional contender were summoned for conversation to the KGB office to intimidate them.

"The pressure on the oppositional newspaper *Naziralnik* and summoning of our activists to the Committee of State Security are connected with the fact that in the pre-election period youth activities are growing. Most of the people who participate in publishing the newspaper, are members of the initiative group for collecting signatures for Milinkevich," local activist said to the Radio Svaboda.

Belarus special services also made an attempt to recruit and activist of the Zubr movement, a technical editor of an independent internet-source Electronic Barysau (www.borisov-e.info) Aleksander Monich.

As Monich told to the Charter'97 press-center: I was in at my workplace. In the end of the shift a young man aged 27-30 entered. He asked the workers and the masters to leave the production unit. Thus only two of us were left in the workshop. He introduced himself as a representative of Barysau branch of the KGB (State Security Committee). He explained at once that he had been given a task to "talk" to all politically active young people. He started with saying that I am famous in Barysau for being a developer of the two well-known independent internet-sites, and allegedly the city executive committee was dissatisfied with that. He offered me to stop these activities. Taking in consideration that I have lots of acquaintances among local democrats, he offered me "cooperation". The cooperation would mean providing information which would be interesting for the KGB department, in particular, information about some local activists, about the activities of the Zubr movement, about rallies planned by the opposition (meetings, seminars, protests). It is natural that I refused to cooperate, saying that I have no wish to become an informer. Then he moved to direct threats. He said that in case I refuse to cooperate, I would be fired from the plant and enrolled to the army. I also offered me any financial assistance in case I would agree. He offered me to help developing the official site of the town. I refused, but he recommended to think everything over once again, and to call him later. But I refused even to take his phone number. In a couple of days he phoned at my place with the same threats and proposals. During the conversation he hinted that they would find the way to imprison me in case I continue to participate in political activities eagerly:"

Source: AXIS Information and Analysis (AIA); January 6, 2005; <http://www.axisglobe.com/>

33. Catholic Priest Expelled and Pressure on Baptists Mounts

Catholic priest Fr. Robert Krzywicki, who was ordered with another priest in mid-December 2005 to leave Belarus by the end of the year, left the country on 27 December. He had served as a priest in the town of Borisov [Barysaw], north-east of the capital Minsk, for 12 years, and his supporters gathered with flowers and gifts on the steps of the parish church to see him off. No reason was given for the decision and Fr. Krzywicki told Forum 18 News Service that "I committed no crime." Baptists from across the country have told Forum 18 that pressure has also begun to mount on their congregations. In western Belarus for example, a member of a small village congregation told Forum 18 from Brest that "there are incidents all over the place. We don't know why things changed for the worse, but we don't believe the pressure has ended." Church members have appealed to the authorities in Brest and the capital Minsk against violations of their rights.

Catholic priest Fr. Robert Krzywicki left Belarus on 27 December 2005, to return to his native Poland, after working as a priest in the town of Borisov [Barysaw], north-east of the capital Minsk, for 12 years. Together with another Catholic priest, he was ordered in mid-December to leave Belarus by the end of 2005, after officials refused to renew his visa. His parishioners launched a nationwide petition against the expulsion. Fr. Krzywicki's supporters gathered with flowers and gifts on the steps of the parish church where he had served, to see him off.

According to the local website myborisov.net, by the day of his departure more than a thousand signatures had been collected on a petition for the authorities to change their mind and allow him to stay. It said no reason had been given as to why the visa extension had been refused. Fr. Krzywicki was himself not given a reason for the decision and told Forum 18 News Service that "I committed no crime."

Meanwhile, members of the Council of Churches Baptists have told Forum 18 that pressure has also begun to mount on their congregations across Belarus. In eastern Belarus, the congregation in Bobruisk [Babruysk], Mogilev [Mahilyow] region, has protested at the official campaign of fines

and harassment conducted against the congregation and one of its families. The official primarily responsible has denied this to Forum 18, claiming to have "excellent relations" with the church.

In western Belarus, "pressure was stepped up about six months ago," one member of a small village congregation told Forum 18 from Brest region on 5 January. "There are incidents all over the place. We don't know why things changed for the worse, but we don't believe the pressure has ended." Church members have appealed to the authorities in Brest and the capital Minsk against violations of their rights.

Pastor Valeri Ryzhuk, who leads the Council of Churches Baptist congregation in the town of Drogichin [Dragichyn] in Brest region, agrees. "Since last summer pressure – including warnings, threats and fines – has increased," he told Forum 18 on 5 January. "The authorities keep trying to force us to register, but this is against the Bible and against our consciences. It represents interference in our church life and is a violation of our human rights. When the law of God and the secular law diverge we have to follow the law of God." He says he and his colleagues always refuse to pay fines imposed for religious activity as they are not guilty of any crime. Congregations of the Baptist Council of Churches refuse on principle to register with the state authorities in post-Soviet countries.

But Pastor Ryzhuk insists that he and his fellow Baptists are loyal citizens. "We pray for our country's authorities," he told Forum 18. "We simply want to worship God in accordance with our principles."

"Recently, persecution of believers is increasing in our country," members of the Baptist Council of Churches congregation in Malorita in Brest region wrote on 21 December. "We are being accused of breaking the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations, which limits the freedom to preach the Gospel and live according to the Word of God. In addition, it requires churches to undergo compulsory registration, to which we cannot agree."

The Malorita church complained of orders "from above" to ban churches from meeting in private homes. It cited a 1 December summons to Pastor Vladimir Burshtyn to attend the local police station, where a statement was drawn up accusing him of leading an unregistered congregation. On 13 December an administrative commission fined him 10,000 Belarusian Rubles (30 Norwegian Kroner, 4 Euros or 5 US Dollars) under Article 193 of the administrative code.

When Pastor Ryzhuk in Drogichin in Brest region was fined 51,000 Belarusian Rubles (154 Norwegian Kroner, 20 Euros or 24 US Dollars) on 9 June 2005 for leading an unregistered service, he refused to pay the fine, considering that he had done nothing wrong. He told Forum 18 that two court executors visited his home on 2 December and seized an oil heater worth 140,000 Belarusian Rubles (427 Norwegian Kroner, 54 Euros or 65 US Dollars), more than double the value of the fine.

The authorities in Brest region have shown concern about their failure to stamp out unauthorised religious activity. An 18 January 2005 report by the region's top religious affairs official Vasili Marchenko, on the religious situation in the region during 2004 clearly showed how upset he was that officials were not in his view active enough in breaking up worship services and in other ways harassing, fining and controlling religious communities and believers.

Source: Felix Corley, Forum 18: January 6, 2005; <http://www.forum18.org>

BUSINESS

34. In 2006-2010 Annual Investments in Construction Field To Make USD 200-350 Million in Belarus

In 2006-2010 annual investments in the construction field will make USD 200-350 million in Belarus, first deputy minister of architecture and construction of this republic Mikhail Abramchuk stated January 11 in Minsk at a meeting of the board of the ministry.

At present the ministry has finished drawing up a comprehensive program on developing the construction branch of Belarus for the next five years. "Such big program has been developed in Belarus for the first time", the first deputy minister noted.

The program will be financed due to credits of banks, local budgets and the innovation fund of the ministry of architecture and foodstuffs, own financial assets of companies and investors including foreign ones.

One more source of financing is expected to become a fund formed due to the deductions made by construction companies at the rate of 5 per cent of the cost of building and assembly operations performed at every object under construction (except for blocks of flats – deductions make 1.5 per cent). According to Mikhail Abramchuk, draft legal enactments on setting up such fund are considered by the government now. "About Br100bln will be annually allocated by this fund to develop the construction branch of the republic", he informed.

One of the biggest investment projects in the ensuing five years will be production modernization at Krasnoselskstroimaterialy, Krichevtsementoshifer and Belarusian cement making plant. Once these projects are over, the cement producers will be able to buoy up the production from 2,9 million to 4,9 million tons. Modernization projects at Belgips will increase the output of cementing gypsum and gypsum plasterboards while at Granit - crush stone production. The glass furnaces will be upgraded at the glass making facility Neman and Borisov crystal plant.

As Mikhail Abramchuk has informed, in 2006-2010 Belarus intends to reconstruct completely the production bases of construction organizations. Thus, the plants of large-panel constructions will increase the capacities 1,4 times in the next three years. The producers of reinforced concrete frames will also get through the reconstruction projects. According to Mikhail Abramchuk, the fleet of construction machines and vehicles will be renewed. For that Mogilev plant Strommashina plans to set up the production of tower cranes.

As the first deputy minister added the program will help increase the industrial production 1,5-1,6 times by 2010. The volume of housing construction in 2006-2010 will be up 1,6 times against the previous five years.

Source: Belarusian Telegraph Agency; January 11, 2006; <http://www.belta.by/engnews.nsf>

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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.
