

Belarus: Stop Arresting Peaceful Demonstrators

(Moscow, March 23, 2006) – The government of Belarus should stop detaining demonstrators peacefully protesting the results of Sunday’s election, and uphold their right to do so, Human Rights Watch said today.

According to official sources, incumbent President Alexander Lukashenka garnered more than 80 percent of the vote in that election, though many have questioned its fairness.

“Belarus must allow people their fundamental right to express dissent peacefully,” said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Lukashenka leads one of the most repressive governments in Europe, with a terrible record on free speech and assembly. But the government must allow people to continue to speak their minds about the election.”

According to local human rights activists, approximately 400 people remain gathered in a tent city in the main square of Minsk, the capital, to protest the results of the March 19 presidential election. The number of protestors has increased during the evenings when people join the protests after work.

In the last two days, police have detained at least 110 people in the streets around the main square as they attempt to join the demonstration or bring food and supplies to demonstrators. On Tuesday, a Minsk court sentenced 40 people for participating in unsanctioned protests, issuing sentences of five to 10 days of administrative arrest.

The arrests follow weeks of intimidation and interference with the work of civil society activists, raising concerns that the police could use harsher measures to end the demonstration. In a recent statement, the head of the KGB, the Belarus security service, equated demonstrations to terrorism and threatened to use “all available means” to stop protestors.

“Belarusian police have resorted to excessive force in past years to break up demonstrations, and they must not do so now,” said Cartner.

Human Rights Watch also expressed its concern about ongoing serious human rights abuses in Belarus. The Lukashenka government systematically violates the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association, rendering a free and fair election in such a context impossible.

“It is impossible to hold a fair election in Belarus while the government stifles independent thought and expression and controls information,” said Cartner.

The Belarusian government also has a long history of interfering with the work of civil society groups that work on human rights or other issues deemed sensitive by the government. On Tuesday, for example, the authorities audited the property of the Belarus Helsinki Committee, the only registered human rights group in Belarus, in advance of a possible court decision ordering confiscation of the property for non-payment of taxes on grants received from international donors. The group believes the case represents a politically motivated attempt by the government to silence the group and shut down its work. Authorities have concurrently brought related criminal charges against Tatiana Protko, the committee’s chairperson. The charges carry a possible sentence of two to seven years of imprisonment. Last year the Ministry of Justice forced the Belarusian Helsinki Committee to shut down its regional network of offices, alleging that the group violated the organization’s internal membership rules and failed to properly register a regional office.

The United States and European Union criticized the Belarusian election, but the Russian government has congratulated President Lukashenka on his reelection and is Belarus’ most important ally.

“The United States and European Union should continue strong support for human rights defenders, journalists and civil society activists in Belarus, not just call for a new election,” Cartner said. “The U.S.

and E.U. should also keep Belarus on the agenda in their engagement with Russia, such as at the upcoming G-8 summit. They should make it clear to Russia that its support for such a repressive government is unacceptable.”

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