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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement regarding Human Rights in Belarus

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 13, 2010

The United States notes with serious concern continued acts of suppression and intimidation aimed at independent media and political opposition figures in Belarus. After some notable improvements in late 2008, we regret that in the period since there has been a litany of continuing violations of OSCE commitments.

Of most serious recent concern are the following events:

- A member of the group Maladaya Belarus (Young Belarus), Artur Finkevich, was attacked on July 8 shortly after leaving the U.S. Embassy in Minsk, while a companion accompanying him was left alone. He was sprayed in the face with an unknown liquid, punched and dragged to the ground. The attackers took his laptop, mobile phone, thumb drives, keys, passport, and wallet. Finkevich was scheduled to leave this past weekend on a U.S. State Department-sponsored exchange program to the U.S. He was unable to travel due to the theft of his passport.
- Belarusian authorities have warned at least two Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty journalists that they are "working illegally" in Belarus. They allegedly exceed the Government's quota on RFE/RL, a quota that violates Belarus's OSCE commitments to allow for a pluralistic and free media in Belarus.
- On July 9, 2010, opposition Party member Vital Kavalenka was jailed for five days along with his brother to prevent them from attending a festival which featured President Lukashenka at its opening ceremony.
- Print runs of two independent newspapers, Volny Horad and Nasha Niva, were blocked from distribution this past week, apparently because of the publication of articles on a Russian documentary implicating President Lukashenka in the disappearances of his political opponents.
- Police interfered with a July 9 meeting between two leaders of the "unofficial" Union of Poles in Belarus, Anzelika Orechva and Andrei Pachobut, by detaining them for more than an hour and searching their car for firearms while they were en route to a meeting with the EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Stefan Fule.
- The editor of the charter97.org website, Nataliya Radzina, was interrogated for at least the fourth time since March, when her home and office were raided.
- Minsk police searched the car of activist Mikhas Bashura and again confiscated petitions intended to honor the writer Vasil Bykaw by naming streets in Minsk and Hrodna after him.

The GOB still has failed to remove Article 193 from its Criminal Code, which dictates jail time for any activity on behalf of unregistered public organization, including religious organizations, and thus legitimizes the state's prosecution of activities by unregistered groups.

These incidents are but a few of many that indicate a systematic increase in the suppression and intimidation of independent media and political opposition in Belarus.

We continue to urge the Government of Belarus to review its laws regarding mass media, freedom of assembly and association, and political-party pluralism, as well as their implementation, to bring them into compliance with the OSCE commitments that Belarus freely adopted. In accordance with our OSCE commitments, we stand ready to work with the Government of Belarus in this endeavor.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.