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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Detentions of Protesters in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 23, 2006

Mr. Chairman,

We spoke at length at Tuesday's special Permanent Council session about the severely flawed nature of the March 19th elections in Belarus. We must now speak out again, as we receive further reports of the Belarus government's ongoing repression of citizens exercising both their right of peaceful assembly and of expressing - freely and openly - their views and opinions differing from those of the government. Since the election, authorities have already detained over 100 peaceful protesters and opposition supporters, and arrests appear to continue. In many cases, the detained individuals' offense seemed to be simply that of trying to bring warm clothes and food to those demonstrating on October Square.

A number of opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's key advisors were sentenced from eight to 15 days in jail for organizing an unsanctioned protest and alleged "petty hooliganism." This is in addition to the other opposition activists who were arrested before the election, and who were recently sentenced from three to seven days in jail.

The "crime" these people were charged with was that of attempting to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, such rights as enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and numerous other international commitments to which Belarus has subscribed. When a government makes almost any form of peaceful protest illegal, then the problem is the law itself, and it is that which should be changed, rather than the peaceful behavior of the protesters.

We call on the Belarusian government to release immediately all those who have been detained or jailed in connection with the election and the subsequent demonstrations. These continued abuses are clearly designed to stifle the fundamental rights of the Belarusian people.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.