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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement Regarding Arrest of Belarusian Presidential Candidate Kozulin

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 9, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States reminds the Belarusian Government that it is the behavior in the period leading up to election day as much as that behavior on election day that constitutes whether or not a free and fair election process has been demonstrated clearly.

The United States is deeply concerned about the March 2 incident in which Belarusian security services' personnel beat up and detained opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin. While attempting to register as a participant for the All-Belarusian Assembly, Mr. Kozulin was brutally beaten and arrested. We now understand that Mr. Kozulin may face charges that could result in up to six years in prison. Independent journalists witnessed the beating, and they along with opposition activists were beaten and detained as well. We also understand that the security officer who led the beating was none other than Col. Dmitry Pavlichenko, the same person who has been implicated by international investigations for direct involvement in the killings of regime critics who disappeared in 1999 and 2000. This latest open and blatant example of government persecution of members of the political opposition is shocking and unacceptable.

In addition, on March 3, law-enforcement officers in the vicinity of Dubrowna seized 250,000 copies of the independent newspaper, Narodnaya Volya, which had reported on this incident. These actions are clearly inconsistent with a government that claims it intends to hold free and fair elections. The United States condemns these actions.

The United States calls on the Belarusian Government to conduct an impartial investigation into the beating inflicted on Mr. Kozulin and to bring the perpetrators to justice. In addition, we once again call on the authorities to release the leader and deputy head of the non-partisan civil society group Partnership as well as all of the other individuals unjustly detained for political purposes for days, weeks and years. The world is watching the Belarusian authorities' conduct of these elections, and will judge the results accordingly, and there are only a few days left.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.