



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Recent Human Rights Incidents in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 8, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We again must take note of the deteriorating situation in Belarus. In late April, Andrei Kim was sentenced to one and one half years in a penal colony because he and 23 other political activists chose to exercise their right to assemble peacefully. He was protesting new laws restricting the activities of entrepreneurs such as street vendors and taxi drivers. Seven other defendants were sentenced to two years' corrective labor with 20 percent garnishment of wages, and the remaining two defendants were each sentenced to fines of 1,640 US dollars, an extraordinary sum given the infraction involved and the country's average monthly wage of about \$34.

This was followed by the sentencing of another entrepreneur activist, Sergey Parsyukevich, to two and a half years' imprisonment and a \$500 fine for allegedly striking a prison guard while incarcerated for participating in a peaceful demonstration. Many see this sentence as retaliation for Parsyukevich's claims of brutality by Belarussian prison guards. His imprisonment was based on a farcical trial that included a witness who "forgot" what he saw. With this verdict, Parsyukevich joins Kim and former presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin as prisoners of conscience in Belarus.

Then, just a few days ago, a Minsk district court fined prominent Protestant leader and pastor of the New Life Church Vyacheslav Goncharenko the equivalent of \$650 for organizing a signature campaign to petition amendments to the 2002 religion law. The judge ruled that campaign organizers failed to seek approval of draft amendments from the Justice Ministry and to register the group collecting signatures. Goncharenko denounced the fine as unjust and maintained that no tools exist in Belarus for citizens to push for changes in the laws on religion.

It is painfully obvious that Belarus intends to continue to ignore its commitments on human rights and democracy. Its actions over the past several weeks clearly demonstrate that it has no desire to improve its relations with the United States or any other country that puts a priority on human rights.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.