



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Arrest of Political Prisoners in Belarus

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 5, 2009

Madam Chairwoman,

The United States welcomed the August 2008 release of Belarusian political prisoners, including former Presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. We also take note of additional steps the Belarusian authorities have taken, including granting permission for two independent newspapers to be distributed through state networks, the registration of the "For Freedom" movement, the formation of a public council through which to engage independent groups, and the commitment by the government of Belarus, as Ambassador Sychov stated on January 30, 2009, to work closely with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to rectify shortcomings in electoral laws and practices. These are all positive steps. But they are also limited in nature. We strongly encourage the Belarusian authorities to take further positive steps and ensure that progress is not reversed, and that follow-through is effective.

We share the concern of the European Union that in several important respects the Belarusian authorities have moved in a negative direction. Messrs. Yuri Leonov and Nikolay Avtukhovich, two former political prisoners, along with Mr. Vladimir Osipenko, face charges in connection with an alleged arson case from several years ago. We urge the Belarusian authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings with regard to these cases are conducted in a fair, open, and transparent manner. As the United States has made clear, a key condition for improvement in U.S.-Belarus relations is progress on respect for human rights and democracy in Belarus.

As reported in the February 19, 2009 OSCE Office in Minsk Spot Report and by the International Federation of Human Rights, police forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators protesting these arrests in central Minsk on February 14 and 16.

And as the OSCE Office in Minsk also reported, three youth activists Franak Vyachorka, Ivan Shyla, and Zmitser Fedaruk have been forcibly drafted into the military. We understand that Messrs. Vyachorka and Fedaruk both had medical exemptions from military service and that Mr. Fedaruk has in fact undergone surgery for his condition. We are particularly concerned about reports that Mr. Vyachorka was beaten on the day he was forcibly taken to army barracks.

Progress on respect for human rights and democracy would lead to an improved relationship between the United States and Belarus.

Thank you Madam Chairwoman.