

BELARUS: Crackdown continues, more human rights defenders detained

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Paris-Geneva, March 29, 2017: Belarusian authorities continue to use detention to prevent human rights defenders from observing peaceful protests throughout the country. The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (FIDH-OMCT) deplores a new series of arrests, harassments and convictions and urges Belarusian authorities to release all detained human rights defenders and investigate allegations of ill-treatment.

As massive protests continue to take place throughout the country, several human rights defenders have been arrested and sentenced this weekend under Article 23.34 of the Code of Administrative Offences (participating in an unauthorized peaceful assembly) in reprisal for their legitimate monitoring activities.

Amongst them, Mr. **Pavel Levinau**, board member of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee was arrested on March 26, 2017, for taking part in protests held in Vitebsk on March 25 and 26 as an observer. Suffering from a heart problem, his blood pressure increased while in detention causing a hypertensive crisis. Mr. Pavel Levinau has been at the hospital under constant police surveillance since then.

Also in Vitebsk, two members of the Human Rights Centre (HRC) "Viasna", Messrs. **Kastus Mardzvintsau** and **Leanid Svetsik** were arrested on March 26 and sentenced the following day to 15 days of administrative detention. In Biaroza, on March 26, a member of HRC Viasna, Ms. **Tamara Shchapiotkina**, was summoned to the police department, interrogated and charged with "conducting journalistic activities without an accreditation" (Article 22.9 of the Code of Administrative Offences). No trial date has been scheduled yet. Moreover, her colleague, also a member of Viasna in Biaroza, Mr. **Siarhei Rusetski** was summoned the same day in "relation to a theft", as he was going out to observe the Minsk demonstration. He was detained in Biaroza police station but later released without charge.

"Belarusian authorities have been using detention as a means to prevent human rights defenders from attending peaceful protests and observing massive violations and arbitrary detentions of peaceful protesters [1]. Freedom of assembly is neither punishable nor negotiable. The crackdown must end immediately," said Dimitris Christopoulos, FIDH President.

In Homel, Messrs. **Leanid Sudalenka** and **Anatol Paplauny**, both HRC "Viasna" members, as well as Mr. **Andrei Stryzhak** (Independent Trade Union "REP") were convicted on March 17, for monitoring protests in the city, and Paplauny sent to prison for 10 days [2].

In Polack, Mr. **Yury Belski**, a member of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) was arrested and placed in custody on March 25, a few hours before heading to a protest in Minsk. He was sentenced on March 27, 2017, to two days in detention on charges of "disorderly conduct". He was released the same day as he had already served his time.

The Observatory recalls that on March 25, 2017, at least 58 persons from various human rights groups involved in the monitoring of ongoing peaceful protests were arrested at the office of HRC "Viasna" in Minsk and released shortly after. Member of HRC "Viasna" Mr. **Aliaksei Loika** was injured during the raid when the special unit police stormed the premises and remains in the hospital with a skull fracture.

In addition, Ms. **Tatsiana Reviaka** (a member of HRC “Viasna” and President of the Belarusian Human Rights House) was arrested the next day on March 26, 2017 in Minsk as she was protesting the arrest of her colleagues the day before. She was released several hours later on the same day. Mr. **Aleh Volchek**, Head of the Human Rights Center “Legal Assistance to the Population”, was convicted on March 21, 2017 in Minsk for observing the demonstration of March 17, in absentia, and sentenced to 13 days. He is not currently serving the sentence as he was absent during the trial which he appealed.

“Reports of ill-treatment of protesters and detainees are very concerning as well as the fact that two human rights defenders are in hospital. Belarusian authorities must ensure peaceful protesters can exercise their freedoms and ensure their psychological and physical integrity,” concluded Gerald Staberock, OMCT Secretary General.

Background information:

Since the beginning of March 2017, peaceful protests have erupted throughout the country to oppose Presidential Decree No. 3 “On the prevention of dependency on social aid” that introduced a tax on non-employment.

Peaceful protests were massively repressed with hundreds of protesters detained by the police. Those detained include human rights defenders, journalists and protesters throughout the country [3].

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH and OMCT are both members of ProtectDefenders.eu, the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.

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Footnotes

[1] On arbitrary administrative detention in Belarus and conditions of detention, see FIDH Report of September 29, 2014: “Arbitrary Preventive Detention of Activists in Belarus”, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/belarus/16113-release-of-a-report-arbitrary-preventive-detention-of-activists-in-belarus>

[2] See the Observatory’s Urgent Appeal BLR 001 / 0317 / OBS 027.1, March 24, 2017. Mr. Andrei Stryzhak was sentenced to 10 days in jail in absentia, after he failed to appear in court. Mr. Oleg Volchek sentenced in absentia is appealing the sentence.

[3] See FIDH Press Release, “Belarus crackdown: more than 200 arrested or detained in two weeks”, March 17, 2017, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/belarus/belarus-crackdown--ore-than-200-arrested-or-detained-in-two-weeks>