



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Growing Atmosphere of Intimidation in Belarus

As delivered by Political Counselor Bruce Connuck
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 2, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

As we have noted on a number of previous occasions, we remain deeply concerned about the growing atmosphere of intimidation of NGOs, civil society, and opposition political figures in Belarus. Such intimidation has recently taken on new intensity with a revival of the old tactic of attempting to tie domestic opposition to alleged nefarious efforts by foreign governments to destabilize the regime.

Although the Government of Belarus has a near monopoly on the media, it also seeks overwhelming control over civil society. It has continued in recent weeks to tighten the screws on the few courageous men and women who dare to exercise views that differ from the Belarusian authorities. That became evident once again by last week's actions against the non-partisan civil society group "Partnership," which was one of the key NGO's monitoring the last elections.

On February 21, the Belarusian KGB detained "Partnership's" leader and deputy, raided its offices and seized its equipment and documents. "Partnership" is just the latest in a long list of prominent organizations, which have been subject to harassment and intimidation in the past few weeks. Interventions by the United States and other delegations at past Permanent Council meetings have already noted the harassment against the Belarus Helsinki Commission, and the youth group "RADA," which was forced to close last month.

Unfortunately, there have been many other recent incidents as well. On February 13, Belarusian authorities detained 22 members of the youth activist group Zubr. On February 16, police detained protesters who had peacefully gathered to remember political prisoners and disappeared people, and to express support for democracy.

The United States condemns such harassment of Belarusian citizens who are exercising their legitimate civil and political rights in the lead-up to the presidential elections. Such actions only intensify our already serious concerns about the Belarusian regime's willingness to conduct an honest election.

Moreover, such actions are in clear violation of several OSCE commitments. These include those cited in the Moscow Document, which notes "participating States will facilitate the ability of such organizations to conduct their national activities freely on their territories." It also violates Paragraph 9.2 of the Copenhagen Document, which reaffirms participating States' commitments to the right of peaceful assembly and demonstration.

Mr. Chairman,

These commitments, reached by the consensus of all participating States over several years, should not be mere words on paper but should truly stand for something. We once again call on the government of Belarus to live up to its OSCE commitments, including by releasing those who have been unjustly detained and to cease harassing those working peacefully to exercise their rights as citizens.

Unfortunately, the Government of Belarus continues to manufacture conspiracies and crises to justify its repression. Recent publications by Belarusian state media claim the United States finances efforts to orchestrate scandals within the country to discredit Belarus before the international community. One egregious example of this disinformation campaign was the February 7 broadcast of the "Agent 590" series, which contended that Belarusian NGO's are nothing more than conduits for foreign intelligence services. Another program charged the U.S. Embassy with planning "the liberation of the Belarusian people from the dictatorship," and made unfounded comparisons with military intervention.

The Belarusian KGB is now making even more irresponsible charges to justify their detention of the Partnership activists, falsely accusing a widely respected U.S. NGO, the National Democratic Institute, of being involved in a plot that allegedly included planned acts of terrorism.

These and other unfounded charges in recent months present a very negative and highly inaccurate view both of United States, policy toward Belarus and of the activities, and even legitimacy, of the Belarusian democratic opposition itself. Such programs are one-sided and extremely irresponsible.

I wish to state clearly and unequivocally that the United States does not seek to isolate Belarus or its people; just the opposite. We want to see a democratic, stable, and prosperous country with strong links to the international community. However, this is becoming increasingly difficult in light of the Belarusian government's repressive treatment of its own people.

We call on the Government of Belarus to recognize its international obligations, to respect the rights of the Belarusian people, and to allow free and democratic elections and the normal functioning of civil society.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.