



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
January 20, 2011

When we speak together in this Council, we, as OSCE participating States, can have a decisive impact. In fact, a test of that potential is presently before us in Belarus. We need to make very clear to the Government of Belarus and to Mr. Lukashenka that business as usual cannot go on so long as members of the opposition, independent journalists, and peaceful protestors are detained. In fact, the circumstances surrounding their incarceration and their continued detention may compel all of us to consider them political prisoners. We would hope that this would not be the case, because there is a better way.

For example, closing the OSCE Office in Minsk is a mistake. We call on the Government of Belarus to correct this mistake and join consensus to keep the office open. The mandate of the Office has not been fulfilled, and the Office can continue to play a useful role in assisting Belarus to meet its OSCE commitments.

As you know, the United States eased some sanctions against Belarus in 2008 because of the release of political prisoners; so did Europe. The United States is considering re-imposing those sanctions if there is no change in the coming days. Travel restrictions, for example, on those responsible for initiating and implementing the ongoing crackdown would have a greater effect if widely imposed by states around this table. We should send the message that if there's not a change in the steps that have been taken since December 19, particularly regarding the detainees, there will be consequences for the leadership of Belarus. I know that we, the OSCE participating States, stand with the people of Belarus and share their desire to live in a free and democratic Europe.

We are further distressed with recent action taken by the Government of Belarus in its continued raids targeting numerous democratic activists and civil society organizations, including against the Belarus Helsinki Committee and the Human Rights Center "Vyasna." Because the Belarus Helsinki Committee had sent a letter to the United Nations conveying its observation that lawyers were not being permitted to see their clients in detention, an assertion confirmed by our Embassy in Minsk, an official warning was issued by the Ministry of Justice January 12 for allegedly "discrediting" the Republic. A second such warning can close down the organization. As one of the few legally-sanctioned NGOs in Belarus, and one tied through its name closely to the work of this Organization, it is the Helsinki Committee's role to observe and report on the human rights situation in Belarus. Also, the offices of "Vyasna," a civil society partner of the Belarus Helsinki Commission in the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" monitoring project, were once again raided by the KGB on January 17, and equipment was confiscated. Unfortunately, this has become a broad practice by the government since December 19, taking Belarus backwards.

In Astana, all participating States, including Belarus, "reiterate[d] that human rights and fundamental freedoms are inalienable, and that their protection and promotion is our first responsibility." We likewise "value[d] the important role played by civil society and free media in helping us to ensure full respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy, including free and fair elections, and the rule of law." Persecuting and intimidating human rights NGOs for playing what we all agreed was their important role is wholly inconsistent with our OSCE commitments.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.