



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus “One Year Later”

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
December 22, 2011

Just three days before he died, Vaclav Havel wrote a letter to political prisoners in Belarus - Andrei Sannikov, Mikola Statkevich, Mikalaj Autukhovich, Zmitser Bandarenka, Ales Byalyatski, Zmitser Dashkevich, Eduard Lobau, and Pavel Seviarynets. In his letter, former President Havel promised that he and his friends would use every opportunity to alert the international community to human rights abuses in Belarus. Unfortunately, Vaclav Havel cannot carry out his promise. His friends can and will however, and we count the United States among this number.

Monday, December 19, marked the one year anniversary of the flawed presidential election in Belarus and the start of the Belarus Government’s brutal crackdown on civil society, political opposition and independent media. Over the past 12 months, Belarusian authorities have imprisoned peaceful demonstrators, suppressed non-violent protests, and worked to silence independent voices. The government has passed amendments to legislation that will greatly increase limitations on the fundamental freedoms of assembly and association. There have also been credible reports of degrading and inhumane treatment of political prisoners. Although a number of them have been released, they remain under the strict control of the government.

Monday saw a continuation of this repressive activity, now into its second year. Dozens of citizens were arrested by unidentified security forces, some violently, for lighting candles of hope. At least 28 have been convicted on administrative charges.

Preventive detentions were conducted, including that of former presidential candidate Vital Rymasheuski and Syarhey Kazakou, an activist of the European Belarus civil campaign. Former presidential candidate Uladzimir Nyaklyaeu and journalist Iryna Khalip, the wife of presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, were sent summons to appear at the corrections department by 6pm on Monday.

Three Ukrainian activists from the women’s movement FEMEN went missing Monday evening in Belarus after staging a protest near Minsk’s KGB headquarters. Their Australian colleague, a journalist, was arrested and later deported to Lithuania, and at least two local journalists covering the protest were arrested and later released without charges but their equipment was seized.

According to the FEMEN activists, the three were apprehended by Belarusian police and KGB officers at a Minsk bus station. They were blindfolded, handed over to another group, and driven all night to a wooded area near the Ukrainian border. They were brought into the woods, doused with oil and were made to undress. Their abductors threatened to set them on fire and also threatened them with a knife, which was later used to cut their hair.

They were then left naked in the woods with no identification papers, money, or mobile telephones. After reaching the village, one of them contacted FEMEN using a borrowed cell phone and the organization notified the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Ukrainian Embassy in Minsk dispatched staff to assist the three activists. We call on the Government of Belarus to conduct a thorough investigation into these appalling allegations, to inform the Permanent Council of its results, and to prosecute those responsible.

We reiterate our call for all political prisoners to be immediately released and rehabilitated, including presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov and Mikalai Statkevich, and human rights defender Ales Byalyatski. We also reiterate our grave concern over new laws that will further restrict citizens' fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression and that target support to civil society.

In this vein, we are further distressed with the Government of Belarus' continuing efforts—in particular the Ministry of Taxes and Levies—to close down the Belarus Helsinki Committee. As the only legally-sanctioned, national-level human rights NGO remaining in Belarus, the Belarus Helsinki Committee plays a vital role in ensuring the government upholds its OSCE commitments and in observing and reporting on the human rights situation in the country. Closure of this organization will be seen as yet another step backwards from Belarus' OSCE commitments.

The United States, in concert with its European partners, will continue to work to hold accountable Belarusian officials who are responsible for repressive actions through targeted measures, including travel restrictions and asset freezes. We remain committed to supporting the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people through our assistance and engagement.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.