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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 22, 2012

The United States continues to be deeply concerned about serious violations of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law in Belarus.

As noted in the May 2011 Decaux Report and the November 2011 ODIHR report, the Belarusian judicial system lacks independence; the right to the presumption of innocence is in doubt; and judges often fail to address allegations that statements were obtained under duress, intimidation, inhumane treatment and possibly torture.

These flaws are of particular concern for capital crime trials, such as the recent trials of Vladislav Kovalyov and Dmitri Konovalov, who received death sentences for their alleged role in the April 2011 subway bombing, a horrendous crime against innocent civilians. We are deeply concerned by their executions coming approximately a mere 100 days after sentencing, amid reports that the Government of Belarus intends to destroy relevant evidence.

Every trial, especially those involving capital punishment, must follow due process to ensure a just and credible verdict. As such, we again urge the Belarusian government to address the findings of the Decaux and ODIHR reports.

We also find the Government's actions restricting freedom of movement worrisome. Since March 7, Belarus has prevented at least eleven opposition politicians, civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders from departing the country. This arbitrary ban on foreign travel by critics of the Lukashenka government is contrary to Belarus' OSCE commitments. We call on the government to cease immediately its harassment of critics of the government and to uphold its OSCE commitments by not restricting the freedom of movement of its citizens.

We understand that the city authorities of Minsk have permitted a rally on Freedom Day, March 25, which will also feature national symbols. We strongly urge the Government of Belarus to fully respect the rights of all individuals to express themselves, to assemble peacefully, and to associate freely, and we further urge the authorities to ensure that police do not interfere with the exercise of these rights.

Finally, we renew our call on the Government of Belarus to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally, to ensure their full rehabilitation, and to stop the ongoing harassment of political activists, civil society representatives, and independent journalists.

Thank you, Chairperson.