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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Continuing Situation in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 17, 2011

The United States remains gravely concerned over the continuing post-election crackdown by the Government of Belarus. If we are to support the democratic values that reflect the standards of the OSCE, the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent documents, we must address the conditions and the actions -- including harsh imprisonment -- faced by those who seek a more open, democratic, transparent and accountable political environment in Belarus. We must affirm the universal rights of each and every individual to have his voice heard or her vote counted; nor should any individual be deprived of their liberty without a fair, non-political trial. We count on the other states of the OSCE to be equally supportive of the rights of the people of Belarus during this difficult time.

We listened very carefully to the response of our Belarusian colleague at the March 10 Permanent Council meeting. In response, we would like to stress two points. First, regarding ODIHR access to the ongoing "December 19" trials: in line with established guidelines for trial monitoring, we hope the ODIHR team to have unrestricted access to both persons and relevant information, including the investigative files and evidence, that are required for the monitors to perform their work. Effective trial monitoring is more than just being present in the courtroom. It is in the best interest of all to ensure that the ODIHR team is afforded the information it needs in order to render an expert opinion and substantive recommendations, consistent with the principle of non-interference in the conduct of the trials.

Second, we highlighted last week the conviction of Aliaksander Atroshchankau, the press secretary of one of the presidential candidates, in conjunction with our call for the Government of Belarus to allow the visit of Representative for Freedom of the Media Ms. Mijatović. We did this because Atroshchankau is the first journalist convicted in the post-election crackdown; meanwhile, other journalists are awaiting trial. This step against independent media should concern us all. We should also be concerned about--and speak out against--the government disbarment of several lawyers who were trying to defend the detainees.

Finally, I wish to express the sincere condolences of the United States to the family of Svyatlana Navumava, who was questioned numerous times by the Belarusian KGB in the weeks prior to her death at home. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family and friends.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.