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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
July 12, 2012

The United States continues to be gravely concerned about serious violations by Belarus of its OSCE commitments on respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

While journalist Andrzej Poczobut has been released pending trial, we believe that his arrest for allegedly “defaming the president” was politically motivated and that the conditions imposed on his release are designed to further limit his ability to exercise his human rights. Moreover, recent days have seen the search of the offices of the Union of Poles and the confiscation of equipment supposedly related to Mr. Poczobut’s case.

We also recently have seen the arrest, detention and release of journalist Pavel Sverdlov of the European Radio for Belarus for “using foul language.” Evidently, such arrests and short-term detentions are becoming an ever more common means to silence dissent in Belarus.

We remain deeply concerned about the condition of political prisoners in Belarus. We have previously addressed the increased restrictions on Ales Byalyatski, and we are disturbed at the court order issued July 4 for the seizure of the offices of the Vyasna Human Rights Center. The location in question not only serves as the Center’s office, but also as the private residence of Mr. Byalyatski’s wife, Natalya Pinchuk.

Belarus, which already has applied travel restrictions on members of the opposition and human rights activists, recently has taken another step to restrict the fundamental freedom of movement – the right to leave one’s country and return to it. We remain concerned regarding current and proposed legislation, like Decree Number 295 which was issued on July 4, that allows for the placement of citizens on the banned travel list by the KGB and is widely viewed as an instrument for further repressing dissent.

In this regard, we are deeply concerned at the news from Belarus this morning that authorities denied the right of Viktor Kornienko, Co-Chair of the initiative “For Fair Elections,” to travel to Vienna to participate in this week’s Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting. This restriction of Mr. Kornienko’s freedom of movement violates a vital Helsinki principle and calls into question Belarus’s sincerity and commitment to the core principles of our organization.

The United States must protest this latest disregard for fundamental freedoms by Belarus. As a result, as long as Mr. Kornienko is denied his right to travel and to participate in our meetings, neither I nor my senior staff will attend them.

We are pleased by the decision of the UN Human Rights Council to appoint a Special Rapporteur for Belarus, which the United States actively supported. We urge the Government now to cooperate fully with the UN Special Rapporteur and all UN Special Procedures.

We reiterate our call on Belarus to release all political prisoners, immediately and unconditionally, to restore their full political and civil rights, and to stop the ongoing harassment of political activists, civil society representatives, human rights activists and independent journalists.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.