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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Belarus European March

As delivered by Chargé d' Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 18, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We took note of the initiative taken by citizens of Belarus to organize the European March on October 14. The estimated 6000 participants courageously emphasized their commitment to a free Belarus that respects the universal values of democracy and freedom.

The decision by the Minsk city authorities to allow the march was encouraging, as was the restraint shown by the security forces during their monitoring of the event. However, we are concerned about the preemptive arrests and detentions of at least 20 organizers of the march as well as other efforts by the Belarus authorities to minimize the impact of the demonstration. For example, on October 8, Minsk police arrested march organizer Yevgeniy Afnagel soon after he met with authorities to discuss the European March. They held him incommunicado until a closed court sentenced him to 10 days in jail for allegedly cursing in public. The following day, a Gomel court sentenced opposition United Civic Party (UCP) Regional Chair Vasil Palyakov and Deputy Vladimir Katsora to seven days in jail on the very same charge of cursing in public. On October 5, BKGB officers raided UCP's Gomel office and confiscated six computers and three copiers in an attempt to thwart their planning for the march. The OSCE has always been in the forefront of protecting the rights of human rights defenders. These incidents underscore the importance of prominent treatment of the problems facing human rights defenders at the Madrid Ministerial as suggested in the CiO's Road to Madrid paper.

We would urge the Government of Belarus to allow all of its citizens to express their views without harassment, interference, or threats of retribution. We also reiterate our concern for the well being of all prisoners held on politically motivated charges and call for their immediate release.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.