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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Politically-Motivated Prosecution in Belarus

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
November 10, 2011

The United States notes its continued deep concern over the human rights situation in Belarus.

As recently as last week, members of international and national human rights NGOs were denied visas in order to monitor the trial of Ales Byalatski, Head of Human Rights Center "Viasna." Mr. Byalatski has been detained since early August and has been charged with "tax evasion on a large scale" for his work as a human rights defender. His trial began last week and is ongoing. This represents another attempt by Belarusian authorities to silence critics through use of the judicial system for political ends.

NGOs denied visas to monitor the trial included the International Center for Human Rights (FIDH), based in France; the Civil Rights Defenders of Sweden; the Human Rights House Foundation of Norway; the Norwegian Helsinki Committee; the Partnership for Human Rights of Belgium, and Frontline Defenders of Ireland.

Since May of this year, at least nine journalists from the Russian Federation, the UK, the U.S., Lithuania and Bulgaria have either had their visas cancelled or have been expelled and banned from reentry into Belarus.

Human rights defenders attempting to monitor the human rights situation in Belarus have likewise been expelled and/or prohibited from entering Belarus. They include 12 members of the Committee for International Control over the Human Rights Situation in Belarus and its International Observation Mission – four from Ukraine and eight from Russia.

We also note that Anastasia Palazhanka, Deputy Chair of "Young Front" and winner of the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage Award, has been told by Belarusian authorities that she cannot leave Belarus to continue her studies in Lithuania. We call on Belarus to honor its international obligations and OSCE commitments regarding freedom of movement for its citizens.

We have repeatedly called for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, and we reiterate that call today, including Mr. Byalatski. Unconditional release should include restoration of civil and political rights of those individuals. We also renew our call for an end to the campaign of harassment against critics of the government.

The United States, in concert with our European partners, will continue to hold accountable those Belarusian officials responsible for repressive actions through targeted measures. At the same time, we remain committed to supporting the aspirations of the Belarusian people for a more democratic and prosperous future.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.