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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
February 17, 2011

Thank you, Mister Chairman,

The United States would like to once again call attention to the ongoing situation in Belarus. We have previously expressed before this Council grave concern with the inappropriate use of force and the detention of hundreds of demonstrators in the aftermath of the December 19 presidential election, as well as the criminal charges brought against five opposition presidential candidates for organizing and participating in mass disturbances. The continuing raids against civil society, independent media, and opposition political parties; the closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk; the harassment of lawyers; limited access by families and legal representation to those incarcerated in KGB facilities; and the flawed vote count all point to a country rapidly retreating from 21st Century Europe and its OSCE commitments.

The United States calls for an end to the extensive detentions and the dismissal of all charges associated with the crackdown; a halt to the blatant harassment of civil society, independent media, lawyers and the political opposition; and the provision of space for the free expression of political views, the development of a civil society, and freedom of the media. We once again call on the Government of Belarus to agree to renew the mandate for the OSCE Office in Minsk. It regrettably grows more obvious by the day that its mandate is further than ever from being fulfilled.

We are particularly concerned regarding media freedom in Belarus. As previously noted, authorities continue to harass independent journalists and media outlets – an important part of the continuing crackdown. We join in the call by OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatovic, for this to end immediately. We express our deep concern at the continued house arrest and limitations on freedom of movement of journalists Natallya Radzina and Iryna Khalip. Radzina has been exiled to Kobryn without her passport and Khalip is not only under house arrest, but she is forced to live with Belarusian KGB agents inside her home monitoring every move and conversation. As the Representative on Freedom of the Media said, Belarusian authorities should drop all charges against the two journalists and unconditionally release them. They should also put an end to detentions, searches and all other forms of harassment of the media. Since the December 19 election, scores of reporters have been detained, questioned, or had their offices searched. Security officers have raided the editorial offices of several independent media outlets, confiscating computers, video cameras, DVDs and other equipment. Alyaksandr Lyukshevich, editor of the opposition website Narodnaya Volya, was questioned by the KGB on February 10 and forced to sign a gag order. We also urge

Belarus authorities to permit Representative Mijatovic the opportunity to visit with journalists in Belarus as she has requested.

Mister Chairman, we listened carefully to our colleague Ambassador Sychov's reply at the February 3 Permanent Council regarding the targeted actions taken by the United States Government against the Government of Belarus. We are confident that ours was the proper response to the abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms that have occurred in the aftermath of the flawed presidential election in Belarus. We will of course review and adjust our policies based on subsequent actions by the Government of Belarus. Lack of progress on the issues of concern is not a path toward improving our relations.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.