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BELARUS: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AT RISK

Statement by the Belarusian Helsinki Committee

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Serious restrictions on civil society activities remain in place in Belarus. By law all NGOs must be registered with the authorities to operate legally, and it is a crime punishable with up to two years in prison to organize or participate in the activities of unregistered organizations.

- The government has repeatedly refused to register the youth movement Young Front and prosecutes its activists just for being members of an unregistered public group that carries out legitimate activities linked to human rights. 1 November 2006, Dzmitry Dashkevich, leader of the movement, sentenced to 18 months imprisonment.

Criminalization of public activities such as anti-government protests and demonstrations is a key method for silencing human rights defenders. There are broad provisions for closing down NGOs, and in recent years, dozens of independent groups have been liquidated as legal entities on spurious grounds. As a result, most human rights organizations that continue their work in the country are operating outside of the protection of the law and at constant risk of prosecution.¹

- In early 2007, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) was ordered evicted from its offices in Minsk, and faced possible liquidation as a legal entity because of loss of "legal address."² Following a wave of international criticism, the decision was reversed and the group's lease was extended for another year by the presidential administrative service, which owns the building where the group rents space [and almost all office buildings over the country]. Despite this, the BHC remains subject to heavy pressure. Its property was confiscated in December 2006,³ and a case to suspend the group on long-standing tax evasion charges is still pending in the Supreme Court.
- 13 July, the Minsk city court decides on liquidation of the NGO "Supolnast Centre", which was established in 1995 and has significantly contributed to the development of civil society. It also participated in independent monitoring of elections.

Involvement in public activities promoting human rights often has negative impact on activists' everyday life. They face repercussions in the workplace, at universities, and even at home.

- On July 3, in Minsk, six activists of the campaign for freedom of conscience were detained: Dzianis Sadouski, Tatsiana Usilovich, Siarhey Lukanin, Aliaksey Shein and two minors – Yulia Koshaleva and Feadora Adryeuskaya. A police officer and unknown men in plain clothes burst into and searched a private apartment and confiscated bulletins of the campaign.
- Youth activist Yury Aleinik was expelled from the 4th year of the President's Academy of Management after he collected signatures against the abolition of students' social guarantees. 5 July, court recognized the case of expulsion of the student not subject to its authority since the President's Academy of Management is accountable to the country's Head and thus refused Yury Aleinik in court protection.
- Starting from 2005 the authorities persecute activists of the Union of Poles of Belarus, defending rights of the Polish minority.⁴

While cracking down on independent civil society activities, the Belarusian government has encouraged the creation of pro-government public associations, which are funded and controlled by the state.

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¹ For more background information, see the chapter on Belarus in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE region. Report 2007 (Events of 2006)*; and IHF, *Human Rights Defenders at Risk in Belarus, Russia and Uzbekistan*, December 2006.

² See IHF and BHC, "Eviction of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee," 24 January 2007, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/viewbinary/viewdocument.php?download=1&doc_id=7210

³ See IHF, "Government Confiscates Property of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee," 5 December 2006, at http://www.ihf-hr.org/documents/doc_summary.php?sec_id=3&d_id=4351

⁴ For more information, see the chapter on Belarus in IHF, *Human Rights in the OSCE region. Report 2007 (Events of 2006)*.