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Belarus: Belarusian youth activists are increasingly persecuted

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by reports that the harassment, detention and imprisonment of youth activists by the Belarusian authorities has intensified in recent weeks. The organization believes that the clampdown forms part of the government's continuing attempts to intimidate and obstruct youth activists, and civil society as a whole, from exercising their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

In the last six weeks, reportedly over a dozen youth activists have been given prison sentences ranging from seven to 15 days, under both the Administrative and Criminal Codes while many more have been detained and even assaulted by Belarusian security services.

Most recently, prominent youth opposition activist and former prisoner of conscience, Mikita Sasim, was detained on 16 August by plain-clothed security officers, during a public solidarity action which takes place every month in Belarus in support of political prisoners and the "disappeared". Reportedly, Mikita Sasim was seized by the officers, his arms were twisted and he was forced into a car. He alleges he was struck in the back and legs and threatened with a beating by the officers. He was driven away in an unknown direction.

Two friends of Mikita Sasim, who tried to prevent his detention, were assaulted by the plain-clothed officers. One of them, 18-year-old Tatyana Tishkevich, is currently in hospital having been diagnosed with "light cranium trauma" following the incident.

Mikita Sasim's whereabouts were unclear until the following day when it was announced that he was being held in Minsk central police station. On 20 August, he was sentenced in Minsk central district court to 10 days' imprisonment for petty hooliganism under Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code.

Amnesty International is aware that Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code is being increasingly used by the Belarusian authorities to detain and imprison youth activists. Many of those imprisoned in the last six weeks have been sentenced according to this Article. In the case of Mikita Sasim, and others, the charge of swearing in public was brought against him.

In a separate incident on 27 July, youth opposition leader Franak Vyachorka, who attended an Amnesty International film-screening event in London in April this year, and Yaraslau Hryshchenya were arrested in Independence Square in Minsk city centre. They were detained as police blocked people from holding a rally to mark the 17th anniversary of the adoption of Belarus's Declaration of State Sovereignty in 1990.

Reportedly, police officers cordoned off the square and detained a dozen activists, including United Civic Party Chairman Anatol Lyabedzka and Belarusian Popular Front Deputy Chairman Viktor Ivashkevich. Most of the detainees were released after several hours, but two of them, Franak Vyachorka and Yaraslau Hryshchenya were held in detention. Both were also charged under Article 17.1 of the Administrative Code. On 30 July, Franak Vyachorka was sentenced in Minsk Zavodskii district court to seven days' imprisonment and Yaraslau Hryshchenya was sentenced the same day in Minsk Leninskii district court to 15 days' imprisonment.

The authorities also continue to detain and sentence activists according to Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code (organizing or participating in an activity of an unregistered non-governmental organization), which was added to the Criminal Code in December 2005 as part of a series of amendments that introduced

penalties for civil society organizations and other outspoken critics of the government in the lead-up to the presidential elections in March 2006. Head of the opposition youth group *Young Front* and prisoner of conscience, Zmitser Dashkevich, who has become a focus of campaigning by Amnesty International youth around the world, was sentenced to one and a half years in November 2006 under this Article. On 7 August, investigators charged three further members of the same organization under the same Article. If found guilty, 18-year-old Anastasiya Azarka, Yaraslau Hryshchenya and 16-year-old Ivan Shyla may be sentenced to a fine or a prison term of up to two years.

Amnesty International calls on the Belarusian authorities to stop using the Administrative Code in order to sentence youth activists to terms of imprisonment for doing no more than peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. Furthermore, the organization urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately review laws, regulations and practices relating to the registration and activities of non-governmental organizations, particularly Article 193.1 of the Criminal Code, and ensure that they comply with international law.

On 24 July 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that the closure by the Belarusian authorities in 2003 of the non-governmental organization *Vyasna* was a violation of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Committee has called on Belarus to reregister the organization and offer the members compensation; the re-registration request is currently pending. A decision will be taken by the Belarusian authorities on 23 August.

Amnesty International would like to remind the Belarusian authorities of their obligations under international law, including under Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the ICCPR, to which Belarus is a state party, which guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. The organization urges the Belarusian authorities to immediately stop the obstruction, harassment and intimidation of civil society activists engaged directly or indirectly in the promotion and defence of human rights in Belarus.

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