



Amnesty International Belarus: Public Appeal

**8 February 2008, AI Index: EUR
49/002/2008**

Prisoner of Conscience: Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou, ex-deputy editor of a weekly independent newspaper, whom the organization believes to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

On 18 January 2008 Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou was sentenced by a Minsk city court to three years in a high-security prison, having been found guilty of "inciting racial, national, or religious enmity or discord" according to Article 130.1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code. The trial was held behind closed doors.

On 18 February 2006, the independent newspaper *Zhoda (Today)*, where Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou was deputy editor, published cartoons displaying the Prophet Muhammad in an article reporting the global protests which followed the cartoons' original publication in the Danish newspaper in September 2005. On 22 February 2006, the *Zhoda* offices were raided by the Belarusian Security Services (KGB) and criminal proceedings were started a few days later. The newspaper was closed down in March 2006. Shortly afterwards, Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou reportedly left Belarus to avoid prosecution.

In November 2007, Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou returned to Belarus to visit his father's grave and was arrested on 18 November. He was held in detention until his trial, which took place in Minsk in January 2008, when he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. The head of the Muslim community in Belarus reportedly opposed Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou's sentence and the closing of *Zhoda* newspaper.

Background

Censorship of the media in Belarus is widespread. Television and radio broadcasters are effectively controlled by the state and restrictions are being introduced to monitor citizens' use of the internet. Additionally, Amnesty International has observed a pattern of increasing harassment, obstruction and intimidation by the Belarusian authorities towards opposition and independent print media. In 2007, journalists continued to be arrested and detained on spurious charges and the offices of various non-state newspapers, such as opposition newspapers *Narodnaya Volya (People's Will)* and *Tovarishch (Comrade)*, were raided by the authorities with

equipment being seized and publications being confiscated. Furthermore, contracts were terminated between state-run services and over a dozen non-state newspapers forcing them to source private or voluntary assistance, thereby greatly limiting their potential for production and distribution. The above measures are clearly being used by the Belarusian authorities in an attempt to restrict public access to information, curb the right to freedom of expression and stifle public debate. Amnesty International believes that the imprisonment of Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou is part of a pattern of continuing intimidation and harassment faced by the independent media in Belarus.

While Amnesty International does not condone the publication of the cartoons, which may exacerbate the current climate of Islamophobia and discrimination, the organization does not believe that the publication of the cartoons should lead to imprisonment on criminal charges. While governments are obliged to prohibit "hate speech" and may impose limited restrictions on other forms of expression to do so, such measures should only be applied in strict conformity with international human rights law.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Please send cards or letters of support and solidarity to Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou in prison. You can write in Belarusian, Russian, English or your own language. Your good wishes will be an invaluable source of support at this difficult time. If you would like to, you can send these messages in Belarusian:

I am thinking of you:	Я думаю пра цябе
We are thinking of you:	Мы думаем пра цябе
I am wishing you well:	Я жадаю табе добра
We are wishing you well:	Мы жадаем табе добра

Please send your greetings to:

Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou
ul. Volodarskogo, 2,
SIZO No. 8470, 1 MVD
Belarus

Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible to the Belarusian authorities, in Belarusian, Russian, English or your own language:

- calling for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience, Alyaksandr Zdzvishkou
- reminding the Belarusian authorities of their obligations under Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Belarus is a state party, which guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association;

Please fax or send your appeals to:

President

Alyaksandr G. LUKASHENKA
ul. Karla Marxa 38, 220016 Minsk, BELARUS
Fax: +375 172 26 06 10, +375 172 22 38 72
Salutation: Dear President Lukashenka

Procurator General

Petr P. MIKLASHEVICH
ul. Internatsionalnaia 22, 220050 Minsk, BELARUS

Fax: +375 172 26 41 66
Salutation: Dear Procurator General

Minister of Internal Affairs
Vladimir V. NAUMOV
ul.Gorodskoi Val 4, 220615 Minsk, BELARUS
Fax: +375 172 26 12 47
Salutation: Dear Minister