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Belarus: Authorities must respect human rights

Today Amnesty International launched a campaign aimed at promoting greater respect for the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression in Belarus, by calling for the abolition of Article 193-1 of the Belarusian Criminal Code.

Article 193-1 was introduced by Presidential decree in December 2005 as part of a series of amendments that introduced penalties for civil society organizations ahead of the presidential elections in March 2006. As a result, it became illegal in Belarus to belong to, or participate in the activities of, an unregistered non-governmental organization (NGO). Amnesty International believes that Article 193-1 violates both the Belarusian Constitution and Belarus' obligations under international human rights law.

Registering an NGO in Belarus is extremely difficult. Amnesty International has observed attempts by various civil society organizations to do so, some of which have been in existence for more than a decade. Applications are routinely rejected by the Ministry of Justice and activists are subsequently targeted.

In 2006, as the Belarusian authorities began using Article 193-1 to sentence activists to terms of imprisonment, Amnesty International began to campaign for their release as prisoners of conscience, targeted solely for the peaceful expression of their human rights.

Throughout 2007, Amnesty International members and supporters from all over the world sent origami cranes to the Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs, calling for the release of youth activist, Zmitser Dashkevich, who was sentenced in November 2006 to one and a half years' imprisonment under Article 193-1. Over 11,000 paper cranes made their way to the Belarusian authorities, highlighting Amnesty International's concerns. In January 2008, Zmitser Dashkevich was released early.

During this time, the Belarusian authorities appear to have stopped sentencing activists to terms of imprisonment under the Article. Instead, activists have been receiving fines or warnings. While this is a positive development, Amnesty International remains concerned as the Article is still being used to harass and obstruct the legitimate work of civil society activists, predominantly youth activists. Any conviction results in a criminal record which can lead to further discrimination, such as expulsion from one's academic institution, harassment at work and a ban from leaving the country.

To keep up the pressure, Amnesty International is calling for the abolition of Article 193-1 now! Belarus must respect the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression. To find out more and to take action visit: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/belarus-must-respect-freedom-of-assembly-association-and-expression> or contact ajung@amnesty.org.

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>