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Belarus: More arrests amidst welcome release of prisoner of conscience

Today's release of prisoner of conscience Andrey Klimov, although welcomed by Amnesty International, was overshadowed by yesterday's arrests of at least 50 people during the peaceful Freedom Day demonstration in the Belarusian capital, Minsk.

"Andrey Klimov's four-year imprisonment epitomises the blatant disregard for human rights in Belarus and the scant value placed on freedom of expression in the country," Amnesty International stated.

Andrey Klimov's four-year nightmare came to an end this morning when he was released from the Minsk UZ-15 labour colony to be greeted by family and friends. Amnesty International adopted the member of the Belarusian parliament as a prisoner of conscience shortly after his arrest in February 1998 for alleged fraudulent business practice. He spent over two years in pre-trial detention before being sentenced to six years' imprisonment at a hard labour colony in March 2000. He was released at 9.30 am local time after having served two-thirds of his six-year sentence.

Amnesty International believed that Andrey Klimov, like other members of Belarus' opposition, was deliberately targeted by President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to punish him for his high-profile role in opposing the forced dissolution of the democratically elected parliament in November 1996 and in the impeachment of the President.

"For Andrey Klimov the price of opposing the president has been the loss of four years' of freedom. The Belarusian authorities should ensure that no one else pays such a heavy price," Amnesty International stated.

"As a first step, the authorities should ensure that anyone arrested during yesterday's unsanctioned but peaceful Freedom Day demonstration in Minsk should be immediately and unconditionally released. Amnesty International will consider anyone imprisoned for their peaceful opposition activities as prisoners of conscience."

Arrests were also accompanied by reports that police officers used significant amounts of force to detain protestors, who were herded onto police buses and other vehicles and taken to detention centres. Around 15 protestors were reportedly held overnight at the Okrestina detention centre in Minsk and were expected to be tried in the course of the coming days.

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