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Public Statement

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Belarus: Protestant pastor to be deported for taking part in a prayer meeting

Amnesty International has written today to the Belarusian Minister of the Interior and to the Procurator General to protest the planned deportation of Jaroslaw Lukasik. A Protestant pastor and member of the Union of Evangelical Faith Christians, Jaroslaw Lukasik, was sentenced on 30 May 2007 for engaging in "illegal religious activity" and issued with a deportation order, according to which he was given eight days to leave the country. That deadline expires today. He was also fined one month's salary. Jaroslaw Lukasik is a Polish citizen who has been resident in Belarus since 1999. His wife and three children are all Belarusian citizens.

Jaroslaw Lukasik was detained on 27 May when police raided a church service that was being held in the home of Pastor Antoni Bokun of the John the Baptist Pentecostal Church. He was released the same day after the Polish consul visited the police station. He was charged according to Article 23 (43) of the Code of Administrative Infringements for holding an unsanctioned meeting. Amnesty International also received reports that on 8 May, the Belarusian authorities reportedly cancelled his residence permit, accusing him of "activities aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus in the sphere of inter-confessional relations." According to reports the police cancelled his residence permit following a report by the Committee for State Security (KGB) that he "conducted illegal religious activities in Protestant communities, took part in activities of radically inclined, politicised groups and resided in an area other than his officially registered place of residence."

Amnesty International is concerned that Jaroslaw Lukasik has been found guilty of offences that amount to no more than the peaceful exercise of a number of rights including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, and the rights to freedom of expression, and to peaceful assembly. The organization is also concerned that the deportation process has not been carried out in accordance with international human rights standards.

In the letter Amnesty International has called on the Belarusian government to rescind the order for Jaroslaw Lukasik's deportation and respect his rights by allowing him to continue his peaceful work in his ministry, alongside his family in Belarus. Amnesty International has also reminded the Belarusian government of its obligations as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Articles 18, 19, 20 and 21 of which guarantee individuals their rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Background

The deportation of Jaroslaw Lukasik is part of the general clampdown on religious communities in Belarus. Under the restrictive 2002 Religion Law, only registered nation-wide religious associations have the right to establish monasteries, missions and educational institutions, as well as to invite foreign citizens to preach or conduct other religious activity in Belarus. In 2005 the UN Human Rights Committee found that Belarus had violated the religious freedom

guarantees of Article 18 of the ICCPR, because it had refused to give legal status to a nationwide Hare Krishna association. The Belarusian government rejected this criticism saying that their refusal was in accordance with Belarusian law.

State permission is required to hold religious services in non-religious buildings, yet communities that do not own their own property find it increasingly difficult to rent property. This particularly affects religious groups such as Protestants who have not inherited historic religious buildings. There is a tendency for landlords to back out of contracts with Protestants soon after the authorities are informed. In October 2006, members of the Minsk-based charismatic New Life Church went on a high-profile hunger strike to try to secure the right to use their own land and building for worship, but to date they have not yet been granted permission. This consistent persecution of religious communities has led some communities to restrict or even cease their religious activities.