

Amnesty International: conscientious objector released in Belarus



Amnesty International has welcomed the release of Yevgeny Yakovenko, a conscientious objector who had been sentenced to one year in prison for “evading military service”. He was released under an amnesty marking the 65th anniversary of the end of the World War II.

Earlier this year two other conscientious objectors have been acquitted. In what appears to be a positive trend Belarusian conscientious objector Ivan Mikhailau has been acquitted of the charge of “evasion of conscription measures.” On 4 May, Ivan Mikhailau’s case was heard for a second time by Minsk Regional Court and he was found to be not guilty. Amnesty International had been vocal on his case. This was followed on 31 May by another acquittal of a conscientious objector. Dzmitry Smyk, a Jehovah’s Witness who had been charged with avoiding mandatory military service was acquitted by central court in the Belarusian city of Homel. The judge commented: “Smyk’s actions do not constitute a crime.”

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*Belarus frees conscientious objector**

Amnesty International

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Amnesty International has welcomed the release of a conscientious objector in Belarus who had been sentenced to one year in prison for “evading military service”.

Yevgeny Yakovenko, who refuses to carry arms because of his

pacifist convictions, was amnestied by a panel of judges in the south-eastern city of Gomel on 23 July.

He was released under an amnesty marking the 65th anniversary of the end of the second world war.

He has repeatedly requested that he be allowed to perform an alternative military service.

“Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release is a positive step but there is still no alternative civilian service in Belarus, which means that he may be summoned to perform military service again,” said Heather McGill, Amnesty International’s researcher on Belarus.

“The authorities must ensure that Yevgeny Yakovenko’s right to conscientious objection is observed and that he is not prosecuted again for his beliefs.”

Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release comes after two other conscientious objectors, Ivan Mikhailau and Dzmitry Smyk, were freed in May.

Both men had refused to carry arms on religious grounds and had asked to perform an alternative civilian service.

Yevgeny Yakovenko, a member of opposition party the Belarusian Christian Democracy, was charged with “evading military service” on 20 January 2010.

He was found guilty by the Central District Court in Gomel on 4 June.

On 10 June Amnesty International sent a letter to the Prosecutor General in Belarus, Grigory Alekseevich, calling for Yevgeny Yakovenko’s release.

The Constitution of Belarus allows for the possibility of exemption from military service and for the substitution of military service by an alternative service to be determined

by the law.

However, the laws allowing for an alternative civilian service have not yet been passed which means that many young men continue to be prosecuted.

“The Belarusian authorities must absolve all conscientious objectors from military service and provide them with a genuine civilian alternative,” said Heather McGill.

The right to refuse to perform military service for reasons of conscience is inherent in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The United States Mission to the OSCE on New Political Prisoners in Belarus



Today the United States Mission to the OSCE has released the following statement regarding the arrest of political prisoners in Belarus:

Madam Chairwoman,

The United States welcomed the August 2008 release of Belarusian political prisoners, including former Presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin. We also take note of additional steps the Belarusian authorities have taken, including granting permission for two independent newspapers to be

distributed through state networks, the registration of the "For Freedom" movement, the formation of a public council through which to engage independent groups, and the commitment by the government of Belarus, as Ambassador Sychoy stated on January 30, 2009, to work closely with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights to rectify shortcomings in electoral laws and practices. These are all positive steps. But they are also limited in nature. We strongly encourage the Belarusian authorities to take further positive steps and ensure that progress is not reversed, and that follow-through is effective.

We share the concern of the European Union that in several important respects the Belarusian authorities have moved in a negative direction. Messrs. Yuri Leonov and Nikolay Avtukhovich, two former political prisoners, along with Mr. Vladimir Osipenko, face charges in connection with an alleged arson case from several years ago. We urge the Belarusian authorities to ensure that judicial proceedings with regard to these cases are conducted in a fair, open, and transparent manner. As the United States has made clear, a key condition for improvement in U.S.-Belarus relations is progress on respect for human rights and democracy in Belarus.

As reported in the February 19, 2009 OSCE Office in Minsk Spot Report and by the International Federation of Human Rights, police forcefully dispersed peaceful demonstrators protesting these arrests in central Minsk on February 14 and 16.

And as the OSCE Office in Minsk also reported, three youth activists Franak Vyachorka, Ivan Shyla, and Zmitser Fedaruk have been forcibly drafted into the military. We understand that Messrs. Vyachorka and Fedaruk both had medical exemptions from military service and that Mr. Fedaruk has in fact undergone surgery for his condition. We are particularly concerned about reports that Mr. Vyachorka was beaten on the

day he was forcibly taken to army barracks.

Progress on respect for human rights and democracy would lead to an improved relationship between the United States and Belarus.

Thank you Madam Chairwoman.

As prepared for delivery by Chargé d’Affaires Kyle Scott to the Permanent Council, Vienna

March 5, 2009