

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

BELARUS: Harsh crackdown on independent civil society amid post-election period

Paris-Geneva, December 20, 2010. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), firmly denounces the crackdown on independent civil society calling for free and fair elections in Belarus.*

On 20 December, in the aftermath of election day, 15 persons in plain cloth raided the Minsk-based premises of Human Rights Centre "Viasna" at around 3 am. According to reliable information, the 15 persons would belong to the Committee for State Security (KGB).

At 3.45 am, ten Viasna members were arrested and taken to the police department of Pervomaisky district. Lawyers **Valentin Stefanovich** and **Vladimir Labkovich** were among those arrested. The others were Mr. **Andrey Paluda**, Mr. **Zmitser Salaeu**, Mr. **Siarzhuk Sys**, Mr. **Uladzimir Mikalaeu**, Mr. **Aleg Zhlutka**, Mr. **Kanstantsin Staradubets**, Mr. **Vital Charniauski** and Ms. **Nasta Loyka**. Special forces then carried out a search of the premises. All Viasna computers and documentation were seized.

At the moment of the arrest, Viasna members were in the organisation's premises to analyse the data that had been collected the day before from 600 election monitors across the country, in the framework of the "Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections" monitoring project, run jointly by Viasna and the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC).

During their interrogation at the police station, the ten Viasna members were asked to write down an explanatory note indicating their exact location on the election day, and whether they had joined the demonstrators. All were then released shortly after 6 am.

Half an hour later, the security forces came again to the Viasna premises, looking particularly for Mr. Labkovich (who had just been released). The latter was not in the premises.

The Observatory was also informed that on December 19, BHC Chairman Mr. **Aleg Hulak** was arrested by riot police as he left a peaceful post-election demonstration at Nezavisimosti Square. He was then taken to Akrestina police detention centre. According to reliable information, he might appear before a judge.

The Observatory firmly condemns the arrests and detentions of human rights defenders denouncing the violations that have been taking place in the electoral context. These arrests and detentions occur in a context of general repression against peaceful protesters calling for free and fair elections across the country. Over a hundred persons were reportedly arrested over the past days.

The Observatory calls on the Belarusian authorities to refrain from harassing human rights defenders, and to guarantee their rights to freedoms of expression and association. The Observatory more generally urges the Belarusian authorities to conform in all circumstances with the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as international and regional human rights instruments ratified by Belarus.

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