

Human Rights Council

16th session

Item 4

General debate

Geneva, 14 March 2011

Joint Statement on the human rights situation in Belarus

I have the honour to make this statement under agenda item 4 on behalf of the following 44 countries, including the members of the Council:

Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Zambia.

Mr. President,

We would like to express our deep concern about the serious human rights violations that followed the presidential elections in Belarus in December, 2010.

We strongly condemn the use of violence against peaceful protesters and the arbitrary arrest of presidential candidates, opposition activists, independent journalists and civil society representatives, as well as the ensuing detention and harassment of the opposition figures, and members of the independent media and civil society on political grounds.

In this regard, we are particularly concerned about the recent sentencing of some opposition activists to several years of imprisonment for participating in the demonstrations that followed the elections in Belarus. They, together with dozens of other opposition activists, are being persecuted by the authorities of Belarus for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. We note also with great concern reports about intimidation of lawyers who provide legal counsel to those who are arbitrarily detained. Especially worrying are reports about the use of torture on detainees as alleged for example by former presidential candidate Mr. Mikhalevich. We call on the Belarusian authorities to refrain from the use of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment during the investigation of detained activists.

We are also troubled by the continued harassment and discrimination against independent media, journalists, civil society actors and human rights defenders,

through i.e. arrest, interrogation, office raids and confiscation of materials and intimidation of those who wish to contact international and intergovernmental organizations. We wish to recall the words of the High Commissioner for Human Rights from her last statement on Belarus that “states have a duty to protect human rights defenders, journalists and civil society from threats, retaliation or pressure stemming from the legitimate exercise of their work in defence of human rights”.

We recall the letter of 18 of February to the Mission of Belarus sent by a group of states encouraging their participation in a briefing to the Council on the human rights situation in Belarus and we remain hopeful of a positive response.

Given the aforementioned concerns, expressed also by a number of international actors, we strongly urge the authorities of Belarus to immediately and unconditionally release and rehabilitate all persons detained on political grounds following the elections on 19 December. We further urge Belarus to respect the human rights of detainees and their families, paying particular attention to the right to legal representation. We also call upon the authorities of Belarus to end the harassment and persecution of the opposition, independent media and journalists, civil society representatives and to respect the freedoms of expression, association and assembly. We appeal to Belarus to cooperate fully with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council mechanisms in this regard.

Finally, we note with regret the decision of the Belarusian authorities not to extend the mandate of the Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Minsk and encourage the Government to reconsider this decision. We call upon Belarus to fully cooperate with the OSCE and its institutions, especially the Office for Democratic Institutions and order to implement its commitments in the human dimension.