



Mr. Grigory VASILEVICH
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Mr. Anatoly Kuleshov
Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus
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16 December 2009

Dear Mr. Kuleshov,
Dear Mr. Vasilevich,

Members of the Human Rights House Network are alarmed by recent reports of abductions of youth activists in Belarus. The instances seem to be of a similar nature and obviously not targeting the activists for money. Our concern is aggravated by reported involvement in these abductions of police and KGB officers.

On 6 December 2009, four men in mufti in Minsk abducted Yauhen Afnahel, one of the leaders of the civil campaign European Belarus. Afnahel was reportedly forced into a white car with tinted windows and taken out of town. According to the activist, the kidnappers didn't say anything, just forced him to sit with his head between his knees. He was let out of the car at a few kilometres distance from Minsk.

A day earlier, on 5 December, unknown persons in mufti seized political activist Zmitser Dashkevich when he was opening the doors of his apartment. On that day, Dashkevich was going to take part in the presentation of *New Generation* coalition uniting *Young Front* and a number of other youth organizations. Dashkevich was pushed into a car, the abductors pulled two caps over his face so he could not see where he was taken. They brought him to a forest, where he was taken out of the car, with a wooden pole put through the sleeves of his jacket to immobilize him. The abductors ordered him to stand and count up to a hundred and then disappeared. Dashkevich had to find his way out of the forest. When he reached the road, he found the village of Antonauka 70 kilometres away from Minsk.

According to our information, a series of similar incidents happened in the course of the year. Six leaders and activists of youth organizations and initiatives have been victims of abductions: Artur Finkevich, Nasta Palazhanka, Dzianis Karnou, Uladzimir Lemesh, Zmicier Dashkevich, and Yauhen Afnagel. Reports by Belarusian human rights NGOs, media and the abducted persons themselves give us grounds to believe that these abductions may be directly related to the victims' civic and political involvement and aimed at intimidating them. These incidents have not been investigated, although abduction and unlawful deprivation of freedom constitute a crime punishable by Articles 182 and 183 respectively of the Belarusian Criminal Code

The recent incidents appear to be a new and intimidating tool for harassment of Belarusian activists, who in an organised manner or independently demonstrate their opposition to the rule of the government of Belarus. As such, they represent a violation of the freedom of expression as

well as the right to assembly and association, as guaranteed by Articles 19, 21 and 22 respectively of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ratified by the Republic of Belarus the 12 November 1973. We also remind the government of Belarus of the Article 9 of the Covenant that entitles everyone to the right to liberty and security of person.

The UN Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance stipulates the right to protection from abductions as we have seen unfold in Belarus, and the states' obligation to investigate the crimes. Although Belarus has not ratified the Convention, the Belarusian government should take notice of the grave nature of such crimes that the Convention underscores.

We call upon you to efficiently enforce Belarusian laws and Belarusian international obligations by conducting a thorough investigation into the reported abductions and bringing those responsible to justice. We also urge you to take every necessary and legal step to ensure that forced disappearances of people are prevented in Belarus. We therefore encourage the Government of Belarus to sign the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and to appeal to the Parliament to ratify this International Convention.

Sincerely,

Belarusian Human Rights House in Vilnius

Norwegian Human Rights House, Oslo:

Human Rights House Foundation

Norwegian Helsinki Committee

Human Rights House, Bergen:

Rafto Foundation

Human Rights House Sarajevo:

Association of Female Citizens "Renaissance"

CURE Foundation

Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Regional Co-ordinator for Youth Groups

Serbian Civic Council - Movement for Equality

Woman and Society Center

Human Rights House Azerbaijan:

Women's Association of Rational Development (WARD)

Azerbaijan Lawyers Association

Ukrainian Helsinki Union, Ukraine

Human Rights Center, Georgia

Copies have been sent to:

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Committee on Enforced Disappearance

Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg

The OSCE/ODIHR, Warsaw

The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

The Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs of the Norwegian Parliament

UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment