



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Belarus in Response to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Special Permanent Council, Vienna
March 21, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States delegation would like to welcome OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President – our own – Alcee Hastings back to the Permanent Council with great delight. We commend you, Mr. Congressman, and the Election Observation Mission for your efforts in Belarus.

For the past several weeks, we have followed closely the developments in the lead-up to the presidential elections in Belarus. Along with several other participating States, we share a deep concern regarding serious human rights abuses and the increasingly repressive measures that have been used.

We support strongly the conclusion of the OSCE Election Observation Mission that the elections were "severely flawed due to arbitrary use of state power and restrictions to basic rights."

While authorities did make minimal changes to the practices followed in the similarly flawed parliamentary elections and referendum vote of 2004 and which we did not recognize, the authorities ignored almost all of ODIHR's recommendations to improve the electoral process. Opposition candidates were registered -- but their supporters were subjected to a wave of harassment, and detention, and some were beaten. The authorities took steps frequently to deny opposition candidates the right to meet with and speak to the Belarusian people. Candidates were given two hours of radio and television time, free of charge, to present their platforms -- but their appearances were censored partially and did little to compensate for President Lukashenko's overwhelming domination of the media.

The OSCE report noted that state employees and students were under pressure not to participate in the campaign of the opposition candidates but were pressured to vote for President Lukashenko. There were major problems with the vote count, as most observers were not permitted to see the marks made on the ballots. Some observers noted poor quality ballot box seals and ballot boxes improperly sealed at the close of early voting. Access to the voter lists on election day was restricted frequently. According to the OSCE report, the vote count was problematic and lacked transparency.

Moreover, eight ODIHR observers and 19 OSCE parliamentarians were either denied entry or refused visas, and could not participate at all. Two American citizens who had previously been allowed to observe elections in Belarus were among those denied visas.

The total picture is one of appalling disregard for OSCE commitments throughout the campaign. For that reason, the United States cannot accept the results of the election as legitimate. The argument that the outcome of the election is a seal of approval for the conduct of the election does not hold water.

Mr. Chairman,

These recent developments do not stand in isolation. They are part of a long, concerted effort by the Belarusian government to persecute anyone who would oppose it. Hundreds of opposition activists were detained throughout the course of the campaign. Non-partisan NGOs were shut down. Opposition candidates and their staff were harassed or detained by police. Newspapers were seized and journalists arrested.

On March 16th Belarus KGB chief Stefan Sukhorenko made new and outrageous charges intended clearly to increase the climate of fear. He claimed that Americans and Georgians were behind a plot, involving opposition figures in Belarus, to bomb polling sites on election day. These charges are patently absurd and an affront to all those Belarusians who have struggled peacefully to exercise their basic freedoms. We call on the Belarusian authorities, in the strongest possible terms, never to use force against protesters exercising their right to peaceful freedom of expression and assembly.

The United States will continue to support all those who work for democracy and freedom in Belarus. We believe the Belarusian people deserve the freedom and dignity that have long been denied them. We look forward to the day when Belarus takes its rightful place in a free, prosperous, and democratic Europe. And we look forward to working with our fellow OSCE members in this cause, by delivering a clear and united message to the Belarusian government that it must fulfill its OSCE commitments.

We remind – once more – the government of Belarus – that any violent suppression of peaceful protests will have serious repercussions.

We salute the courageous people who are willing to protest peacefully the results of these fraudulent elections. The right to assemble peacefully is an inalienable human right and a basic tenet of the OSCE. We will stand with the people of Belarus and those fighting for democracy, and back their aspirations to take their rightful place among the world's democracies.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.