

Belarus Warns Rights Group as Western Pressure Grows

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MINSK — The Belarussian government accused a human rights group on Thursday of seeking to discredit the country after the re-election last month of President Alexander Lukashenko, which sparked huge street protests.

The warning by the Justice Ministry to the Belarus Helsinki Committee was part of a continuing crackdown on dissent in the wake of the Dec. 19 protests, in which hundreds of political activists were arrested along with Lukashenko's opponents.

The ministry, in a letter, accused the group of passing on information to international organizations that "intentionally distorts the real situation and represents an attempt to discredit Belarus in the eyes of the international community."

A representative of the group said the move appeared linked to lawyers' complaints that they have been unable to see those still being held on charges of organizing "mass unrest."

These include four candidates who ran against Lukashenko in the election.

"We sent an official appeal to the UN in which we showed the pressure which is being exerted on lawyers. Naturally, this did not please the Justice Ministry," said Garry Pogonyailo, deputy head of the group.

In Budapest, Philip Gordon, U.S. assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, said Thursday that the EU and the United States should make it "very clear" to Belarus that business as usual could not go on as long as members of the opposition and peaceful protesters were detained.

"In these circumstances, that is to say, their continued detention, we would be obliged to consider them political prisoners," he said in a speech.

Gordon said the United States would consider shortly whether to reimpose sanctions on Belarus, eased two years ago after the release of political prisoners.

Official figures said Lukashenko won almost 80 percent of the vote. But his opponents say the election was rigged, and a monitoring team from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe termed the count deeply flawed.

In Vienna, the OSCE's new chairman, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis, called on Belarus on Thursday to rethink its closure of the group's mission in the country. On Dec. 31, Belarus refused to extend the mandate of the OSCE's operations.

Azubalis stood by the critical findings of the OSCE election observers.

(Reuters, AP)

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