

EU Readies Penalties, Lukashenko Sneers

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BRUSSELS — The European Union will reinstate a visa ban on President Alexander Lukashenko and other Belarussian officials next week in response to his crackdown on protests following his disputed Dec. 19 re-election, EU diplomats said.

EU foreign ministers are expected to agree to re-impose visa bans that were suspended by the EU in 2008 to encourage reforms when they meet in Brussels on Monday.

"In principle, it is agreed, visa restrictions will be put back in place," one EU diplomat said.

In Minsk, Lukashenko sneered at possible EU action.

"You threaten me with sanctions. Good luck with that. I have been living with these sanctions for 10 years already. They [in the West] thought they could play a game with us and lullaby us while creating a fifth column behind our backs," he told the Belarussian parliament on Thursday.

The EU imposed travel sanctions and froze assets of Lukashenko and other Belarussian officials in 2006 after his last re-election which also led to street protests. The financial measures remain in place and more are likely to be introduced.

More than 150 officials will be barred from the 27 EU states, including some responsible for the post-election violence, the diplomat said.

Diplomats said the EU will also not hold any talks with Minsk over a financial assistance program for reforms for now.

Scores of opposition activists, including several challengers for the presidency, were arrested on Dec. 19.

Belarussian authorities have indicated that some of them could go on trial as early as next month for instigating mass unrest, a charge that carries up to 15 years jail.

Referring to the detainees, Lukashenko said: "Why are you sitting in a detention cell? Just give three honest answers to three questions and you can go home to your children. Lukashenko is not bloodthirsty."

Lukashenko also accused Poland of plotting to overthrow him in order to recarve the border between the two countries.

He said Poland wants to move the border east some 250 kilometers to Minsk, where it was before the start of World War II.

"Some people see a border near Minsk in their dreams," he said.

Asked to comment on Lukashenko's claim, Polish Foreign Ministry spokesman Marcin Bosacki said, "We will not react to this kind of provocation."

Lukashenko has previously accused Poland and Germany of plotting to overthrow him, claims both countries have rejected.

(Reuters, AP)

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