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Lukashenko Prepared to 'Strike Hard'

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MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko declared on Tuesday that he would "strike hard" to suppress any further protests against policies aimed at pulling the ex-Soviet country out of economic crisis.

Calls are multiplying on social networking sites for public protests, and motorists last week rallied in the center of Minsk in protest at a sharp rise in the price of gasoline — unusual for Belarus where people normally show little appetite for street demonstrations.

In the latest protest last weekend, scores of people rallied on the border with Poland, blocking a crossing point, before being dispersed forcibly by police. They were protesting against restrictions on the quantity of gasoline and other goods they could take out.

Lukashenko, who has ruled the country for 16 years but whose authority is being hurt by the crisis, warned that he was ready to crack down hard on any more unrest.

"They are organizing strikes because we do not allow them to take fuel, cigarettes and other goods out of the country without charge," he said, in comments reported by the state news agency BelTA.

"These people used to be called speculators. And they are speculators. And I am supposed to just look at that?" he said during a district tour outside the capital.

Referring to calls on the Internet for public protests, Lukashenko went on: "We have the opposition in Minsk on social networks. They use the Internet to call for strikes. ... I will look, watch and then I will strike hard so that they will not get a chance to defect abroad."

One opposition video placed on the Internet under the slogan "Conquer your fear: Become a hero" is urging opponents of Lukashenko to demonstrate in the capital and launch a national strike from July 3.

Belarussian trade unions, which have traditionally been loyal to Lukashenko, have warned that rising prices are leading to a greater mood of protest in the country.

Many analysts attribute the crisis to public overspending ahead of the December election when Lukashenko was re-elected for a fourth term.

It has also imposed a freeze on the price of core foodstuffs, but people are still buying what staples they can to hoard.

Minsk can expect to receive $1.2 billion in loans from a Russia-led bailout fund this year, but it also needs International Monetary Fund support of between $3 billion and $8 billion dollars.

The IMF, ending a two-week mission to Minsk on Monday, gave only lukewarm support for government anti-crisis policies and urged it to let the ruble float freely, freeze wages and raise interest rates to hold more money within the banking system.

Delivery of IMF aid is complicated by Lukashenko's poor image in the West following his December re-election.

Police rounded up hundreds of people, including several presidential candidates, who denounced the vote as fraudulent. Western monitors also criticized the ballot, and the United States and the European Union have since introduced travel bans against Lukashenko and his inner circle of associates.

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