

Belarus Fumes as U.S. Teaches Activists

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Clinton speaking at a training camp in Vilnius on how to use social media to organize and communicate safely. **Alex Brandon**

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko said public protests against his rule were part of a plan to overthrow the government Sunday, two days after Belarussian activists attended a U.S. government-backed training camp in neighboring Lithuania to learn how to protect themselves from official harassment as they use social media to organize protests.

Russian authorities have kept a wary eye on social media and the U.S. State Department's use of it after the political opposition in Egypt and Tunisia used the Internet to depose their countries' governments earlier this year.

Speaking in Minsk at the opening a military parade on Belarus' Independence Day, Lukashenko said "an escalation of information intervention is under way" as part of plans drawn up in "the capitals of separate countries" to bring about a popular revolution.

"We understand that the goal of these attacks is to sow uncertainty and alarm, to destroy social harmony, and in the end to bring us to our knees and bring to naught our hardwon independence," Lukashenko said.

Young protesters had been urged through social networking web sites to attend the parade in downtown Minsk and start clapping as soon as Lukashenko began his speech. A Reuters correspondent saw at least one person who began clapping and was quickly led away by plainclothes policemen.

The respected rights group Vesna said the government also detained dozens of other activists, including Stanislav Shushkevich, Belarus' first post-Soviet leader. Many other activists were called in by the KGB and warned not to protest, Vesna spokesman Valentin Stefanovich said.

The government also blocked access to popular social networking sites on Sunday in an attempt to prevent opposition protests on the holiday, the anniversary of the end of Nazi occupation in 1944.

Belarussians have been taking part in regular protests coordinated through social networks in recent weeks. Protesters in most cases don't chant any slogans or carry banners, but simply clap their hands in unison instead.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized the repression of the peaceful protests on Friday as she urged nations to support fledgling democratic movements in the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere.

Speaking at a pro-democracy gathering in Vilnius, about 160 kilometers from Minsk, Clinton recalled Lithuania's fight against Soviet domination, saying democracies had a special responsibility to help the oppressed.

"We should speak out when a country like Belarus brutally represses the rights of its citizens or where we see opposition figures facing politically motivated prosecution, or governments refusing to register political parties," she said.

While she did not cite them by name, Clinton appeared to be alluding to a trial that got under way on Wednesday against former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on charges of abuse of power as well as to Russia's refusal last month to register the Party of People's Freedom.

Clinton also visited a training session for about 80 activists at what the State Department calls "Tech Camp," an effort by her department, Microsoft, Twitter, Skype and Facebook to teach activists to use social media sites to organize and communicate safely.

A Belarussian activist said he attended the camp to learn how to keep his group safe online when it uses social media to organize protests at home. He requested anonymity because he heads an organization that has not been officially registered, a crime punishable by six months to two years in jail in Belarus.

He and a compatriot said the camp experience had given them a sense of comfort as they return to deal with what they called the daily threat of life and work in their country.

The State Department has spent about \$50 million to teach activists how to circumvent firewalls and protect themselves in repressive nations, said a U.S. official who wasn't authorized to speak on the record. The Vilnius technology camp is the third they have held since December, after sessions in Santiago, Chile, and Jakarta, Indonesia.

(Reuters, Bloomberg, AP, MT)

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