

U.S. Bill Tightens Belarus Sanctions

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. House of Representatives has passed a bill tightening sanctions against Belarus and calling for the release of all political prisoners there.

The bill, passed by the Senate last week, was approved in the House by unanimous consent Tuesday and now goes to President Barack Obama for his signature.

The legislation expands the list of Belarussian officials subject to a visa blacklist and financial sanctions to include security officials involved in the crackdown on protesters challenging the disputed December 2010 election that gave a new term to authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

The bill also urged the International Hockey Federation to suspend plans to hold the 2014 World Ice Hockey Championship in the Belarussian capital, Minsk, saying the Lukashenko government plans to use the event to legitimize its unjust rule.

Lukashenko has repressed opposition and independent media since becoming leader of the nation in 1994.

He was declared the winner of the December 2010 election, but tens of thousands of protesters assembled to denounce alleged vote fraud. Police harshly broke up that demonstration and arrested about 700 people, some of whom remain in jail, including two of the candidates who opposed Lukashenko.

The bill requires the release of all individuals jailed in the post-election crackdown as a condition for ending the U.S. sanctions against the government of Belarus.

"This has been the worst political crackdown in Europe in well over a decade," Rep. Chris Smith of New Jersey, a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee who sponsored the bill, said in a speech on the House floor. "The post-election crackdown has followed the pattern, however, of repression that has characterized Lukashenko's nearly 17-year rule.

"Through a series of rigged elections, large-scale intimidation, and the suppression of independent media and civil society, the dictator has long consolidated his control over virtually all national institutions. His dictatorship has the worst record for human rights by far of any government in Europe," said Smith, a New Jersey Republican.

The legislation also asks the State Department to report on the Belarussian government's arms sales and cooperation with other countries in censoring or monitoring the Internet. It also states that it is U.S. government policy to condemn the "fraudulent" 2010 election and work for the release of all Belarussian political prisoners.

It also calls for new presidential and parliamentary elections that will comply with standards set by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

On Monday — the one-year anniversary of the post-election demonstration — Smith was joined at a news conference by Irina Krasovskaya, whose husband, a Lukashenko opponent, was kidnapped and presumed killed in 1999 by Belarussian secret police.

"The physical pressure on political prisoners is dramatically increasing, and I believe that now there is a real threat to the lives of political prisoners," said Krasovskaya, who heads the We Remember Foundation and took part in last year's demonstration in Minsk. "Please do not allow Lukashenko to kill again."

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