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Belarus Frees 250 Political Prisoners in U.S.-Brokered Deal

By AFP

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Belarus' President Alexander Lukashenko meets with U.S. envoy John Coale in Minsk on Thursday.
Photo by Handout / Belarusian presidential press service / AFP

Belarus freed 250 political prisoners on Thursday following negotiations with the United States, while Washington agreed to remove sanctions on several Belarusian companies in return, a U.S. official said.

The prisoner release, the largest in years, came hours after U.S. envoy John Coale met Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk.

U.S. President Donald Trump has sought to build ties with Belarus, a close ally of Russia, since taking office last year, easing sanctions on the country and welcoming it to his "Board of Peace."

The authoritarian state in eastern Europe has released dozens of prisoners in recent months,

largely due to U.S. efforts.

"Today's release of 250 individuals is a significant humanitarian milestone and a testament to the President's commitment to direct, hard-nosed diplomacy," Coale wrote on X.

"Freedom is our goal. We extend our deepest gratitude to our Lithuanian partners for their pivotal role in this mission," he added.

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Among those released on Thursday were human rights activists Valentin Stefanovich, Marfa Rabkova and Anastasiya Loika, Belarusian rights group Viasna reported.

Belarus still holds hundreds of political prisoners in its jails, many of whom were arrested after a disputed 2020 election that triggered widespread protests.

Opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya thanked Trump for his efforts that were "saving lives" and urged the release of those still held behind bars.

Coale announced that the United States would remove sanctions from several Belarusian banks and fertiliser producers in return, as well as the Finance Ministry.

He also suggested Lukashenko could visit the United States.

"President Trump constantly refers to President Lukashenko as his good friend and a respected leader," he said.

The West had heavily sanctioned Minsk over its role in facilitating the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as its crackdown on protesters in 2020.

Lukashenko has ruled Belarus since 1994 with an iron fist, in what critics have called Europe's last dictatorship.

Elections held in August 2020 resulted in another landslide victory for the longtime leader, a result that the opposition decried as blatantly falsified.

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