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Belarus Frees 25 More Political Prisoners in Return for U.S. Sanctions Relief

By Reuters

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Belarusian President Lukashenko and U.S. envoy Coale meet in Minsk. **President of the Republic of Belarus / Reuters**

Belarus has agreed to free 25 prisoners in return for a further easing of U.S. sanctions, an envoy for U.S. President Donald Trump said on Wednesday.

The deal was part of lengthy negotiations in which Washington is urging Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko to free hundreds of people, including human rights campaigners, political activists, journalists and lawyers in exchange for sanctions relief and an easing of his international isolation.

Trump's envoy, John Coale, told reporters in the Belarusian capital Minsk: "We agreed to an interim deal, and as a show of goodwill Belarus will release 25 people and in exchange the

United States will lift sanctions on two companies."

The figure of 25 was much lower than the 250 that Coale persuaded Lukashenko to release when he last visited Minsk in March.

Coale said both sides would work to resolve outstanding issues to pave the way for another prisoner release and the removal of further sanctions.

"We will continue to improve U.S.-Belarus relations and are working to secure the release of more people in the very near future. We are not finished!" he posted later on X.

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Belarusian human rights group Viasna said a new round of prisoner pardons had started, with relatives of some detainees being told they could pick up their loved ones from prison on Wednesday morning.

Viasna, which is banned in Belarus, says the former Soviet state still holds more than 900 political prisoners, even after Coale negotiated the release of hundreds since the middle of last year.

Among the most frequent charges against them are "extremist" activity, conspiring to seize power, incitement to hatred or insulting the president.

At Tuesday's talks with Coale, Lukashenko denied the people in question were political prisoners and rejected assertions by rights groups and the exiled opposition that he is steadily arresting more people to replace those he releases.

The two companies to be removed from U.S. sanctions are Lakokraska, a manufacturer of paints and industrial coatings, and Bellesbumprom, a state-owned industrial concern that oversees the forestry, pulp and paper sectors. Sanctions against them have been in place since 2008 and 2023, respectively.

Coale also promised Lukashenko on Tuesday to get U.S. banks to hand back tens of millions of dollars in frozen Belarusian assets.

Coale's efforts since last year have led to the release, among many others, of Nobel Peace Prize winner Ales Bialiatski and leading opposition figures. His diplomacy has earned gratitude from many Belarusians, while also raising concerns.

"We should use every opportunity to save lives. But we should not confuse releases with political change. Repression continues, and Lukashenko continues supporting Russia's war," exiled opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya said in comments to Reuters on Tuesday.

"The purpose should be to empty the prisons, not to rehabilitate the dictatorship."

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