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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement in Response to Belarus Regarding U. S. Sanctions

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 1, 2011

In response to the concerns raised by my Belarusian colleague in connection with the specific sanctions decisions my government announced over the summer, the United States has consistently maintained a clear and consistent policy in our relationship with Belarus. Enhanced respect for democracy and human rights are central to improving bilateral relations. We, along with many others, had hoped that the December 2010 presidential elections in Belarus would meet international standards.

Unfortunately, as ODIHR noted in its report, the elections failed to meet international standards. Immediately following the flawed elections, the Government of Belarus conducted a large-scale crackdown that included arrests, trials and prison sentences for individuals who participated in peaceful post-election protests. Both the United States and the European Union consider those arrested to be political prisoners.

I would also cite the report of the OSCE Rapporteur on Belarus, who independently found that the events since the December elections indicate the “seriousness, duration and scale of gross and systematic human rights violations... Beneath some legal niceties, there is neither independent justice, nor rule of law in Belarus.”

Those events led to the imposition in January of U.S. and European Union travel restrictions, asset freezes and sanctions against Belarusian officials and entities. The continuing crackdown and incarceration of political prisoners led the United States to impose additional sanctions in August as my Belarusian colleague has pointed out.

U.S. policy remains firm today: we reiterate our call for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. On December 1st in Astana, the Government of Belarus acknowledged that enhanced respect for democracy and human rights are essential to the progress of the country and its citizens.

My Belarusian colleague made reference to a number of international instruments including the Helsinki Final Act and its relationship to the exercise of sovereign rights of states. I remind all of us here that our leaders in Astana “categorically and irrevocably reaffirmed” that the Human Dimension commitments “are of direct and legitimate concern of all participating States and do not belong to the internal affairs to the State concerned.”

We urge the Government of Belarus to end its self-imposed isolation and uphold the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all its citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.