

U.S. Seeks Release of Belarussian Activist

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WASHINGTON — The United States has called for the immediate release of Ales Belyatsky, a leading Belarussian human rights activist detained last week on tax evasion charges his rights group denounced as political.

State Department spokesman Mark Toner described Belyatsky's detention, which his group, Vesna-96, said occurred late Thursday, as the latest in a series of rights violations by the government of Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko.

"We are deeply concerned about the arrest," Toner said Monday.

"Belyatsky's arrest represents another unfortunate sign of Belarus' self-isolation and violation of international standards on democracy, human rights and the rule of law," Toner said. "The United States calls on the government of Belarus to immediately and unconditionally release Mr. Belyatsky and the more than 40 political prisoners in Belarus today."

Lukashenko's government has cracked down on the opposition after a disputed December 2010 election in which he secured a fourth term, sentencing dozens, including former presidential candidates, to prison for taking part in a rally to protest against the election results.

Vesna-96 has provided legal aid to those prosecuted over the December rally and runs a web site to publicize cases of human rights abuses.

The United States and the European Union have introduced travel restrictions and other sanctions against Lukashenko and other Belarussian officials this year after condemning the post-election crackdown.

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