

U.S., European Union Rap Belarus on Rights

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WASHINGTON — The United States and the European Union called on Belarus to release and rehabilitate all political prisoners and voiced concern about deteriorating rights conditions in the year since a crackdown.

"Over the past 12 months, the Belarussian authorities have imprisoned peaceful demonstrators, suppressed nonviolent protests and worked to silence independent voices," said a joint statement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and EU High Representative Catherine Ashton.

They voiced concern about "credible reports of degrading and inhumane treatment of political prisoners" caught up in the crackdown by the government of President Alexander Lukashenko.

"We reiterate our call for all political prisoners to be immediately released and rehabilitated," said the statement, which came Sunday, two days after the European Union imposed sanctions on two Belarussian officials involved in prosecuting human rights activist Ales

Belyatsky.

Clinton and Ashton called for the release of Belyatsky, who was jailed for 4 1/2 years for tax evasion in November, as well as presidential candidates Andrei Sannikau and Mikalai Statkevich.

"We also express grave concern over new laws that will further restrict citizens' fundamental freedoms of assembly, association and expression and that target support to civil society," the statement said.

Improvement in Belarus' relations with the United States and the European Union is "conditional" on progress by Minsk in the respect for fundamental human rights, the rule of law and democratic principles, it said.

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