



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### Statement on Belarus

Delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative, Douglas Davidson  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
September 5, 2003

Thank you Mr. Chairman. Like the European Union, the United States would like to raise its serious concerns about the steps that the Belarusian government has recently taken to close several non-governmental organizations in Belarus. These steps have reinforced our larger concern that the Belarusian government is not meeting its commitment to strengthen civil society within that country.

Let me cite a few recent examples have given rise to this concerns:

On July 31, the Center of Youth Initiatives "Kontur" was closed on the grounds that its office was located at a location different from the address where it was registered, and for its alleged illegal use of foreign assistance.

On August 21, as the Italian Ambassador speaking on behalf of EU just pointed out, a court in Grodno closed the Ratusha resource center on the grounds that it had illegally used and stored a printing machine without a proper license, despite the fact that Ratusha had tried to obtain the necessary license.

New Cases of NGO Harassment:

On August 20 the Ministry of Justice issued a warning to the Belarusian Helsinki Committee for having quotation marks in their stamps and letterhead. Local officials in Gomel had on a previous day begun a tax inspection, demanding all documents from the last three years, including membership lists.

On September 2, the Ministry of Justice issued a written warning to the Lev Sapeiga Foundation (LSF) for engaging in activities not provided for in the organization's charter. In its letter, the Ministry claimed that youth training seminars organized by the LSF branch in Mogilov included, and here I quote "representatives of unregistered non-governmental organizations whose activities are banned in the Republic of Belarus." End of quote. The training seminars were organized in cooperation with the German Young Socialists (GYS). According to LSF representatives, agreement on the training seminars was reached in advance after consulting both Belarusian and German authorities.

We are watching very closely the case now, being considered today by a Minsk City court, concerning whether to liquidate the public organization, Legal Assistance to the Population, an organization which provides free legal assistance to the public. This would mark the first GOB closure of a human rights defense organization.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, like the EU before us the United States also regrets that the OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media, Mr. Freimut Duve, was unable to visit Minsk. We, too, believe that heads of institutions should be able to carry out their functions in a way consistent with their mandate.

In closing Mr. Chairman, the facts of these incidents have cast doubt on the words we hear from the Belarusian government about meeting its commitments, particularly with regard to civil society. We look forward to not just to explanations from our Belarusian colleagues, but to also a real change in Belarus it self.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.