

Belarus: UN expert decries Government's return to mass violence against peaceful protestors

28 March 2017 – A United Nations-appointed independent expert on the human rights situation in Belarus has expressed dismay over the Government's return to the policy of violent mass repression against peaceful demonstrators, non-governmental organizations, journalists and political opponents, and is calling on the authorities there to stop harassment and violence.

"The events of the last weekend prove the pre-meditated character of the repressive measures, and show an open return by the Government to its old policy of mass repression against citizens who exercise or dispense defense for human rights provided by the constitution and international treaties," said the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Belarus, Miklós Haraszti, in a news release from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

He was referring to the crackdown on March 25 and 26 against dozens of human rights defenders, both local and international, that came after hundreds of peaceful demonstrators against the Government's social policies had been violently attacked, arbitrarily arrested and deprived of their liberty, and then summarily fined or sentenced to prison from one to two weeks.

Since early February, demonstrators have been protesting against a decree under which a fine can be levied against anyone who does not work more than 183 days and is not declared officially unemployed.

Mr. Haraszti said he was "particularly shocked" by the raid against non-governmental organizations, such as Viasna, in their own offices, accompanied by physical violence, and by the disappearance for three days of political opponent Mikalai Statkevich, who was eventually released from the facility of the intelligence service.

"Two weeks ago, I, together with other human rights experts, had warned that further violations could be committed by the Government of President Lukashenko, known for its history of violent oppression of any form of dissenting views," the expert said, expressing regret that his fears materialized.

"I will continue to be vigilant and call on the international community to press for opening to dialogue with human rights defenders and those who promote peaceful and democratic change in Belarus," Mr. Haraszti said.

Special Rapporteurs and independent experts are appointed by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council to examine and report back on a specific human rights theme or a country situation. The positions are honorary and the experts are not UN staff, nor are they paid for their work.