

Brussels, March 16, 2006

Statement of Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy Benita Ferrero-Waldner on latest developments in Belarus

The new wave of arrests of opposition leaders in Belarus over the last two days is completely unacceptable.

I am dismayed by reports that Anatoly Lebedko, a prominent member of the united opposition front that I had met in Strasbourg last autumn, has been arrested along with other members of the team of the registered candidate Aleksander Milinkevich in the last 24 hours.

Such arrests have no place in the conduct of free and fair elections. I call again on the Belarusian authorities to release immediately those opposition members who are currently still detained.

I also deplore the fact that a delegation of MEPs who planned to follow the election in Belarus have been informed they would be denied entry to Belarus, and have had to cancel their trip. The presence of parliamentary delegations makes a valuable contribution to the evaluation of any election process and is crucial to support democracy building.

I also condemn the fact that, several members of NGOs have been arrested, including members of a Scandinavian team of election experts, and that a number of independent journalists and election experts have been denied access to the Belarusian territory.

Three days before the election, the Belarusian authorities should recall that the EU has made clear it stands ready to take further appropriate restrictive measures against the responsible individuals, if the elections are not conducted in a democratic manner.