

PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

BELARUS: The authorities deny visas to FIDH President and Honorary President to attend Ales Bialiatski's trial

Paris-Geneva, November 2, 2011. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), strongly condemns the refusal by the authorities of Belarus to grant FIDH President, Ms. Souhayr Belhassen, and Honorary President, Mr. Patrick Baudouin, visas to observe the trial of Mr. Ales Bialiatski, FIDH Vice-President and President of the "Viasna" Centre for the Defence of Human Rights, who is held in pre-trial detention since August 4, 2011 on charges of "serious tax evasion".*

As soon as the trial of Mr. **Ales Bialiatski** was scheduled for November 2 before Minsk Maskouski District Court, under the presidency of Judge Siarhei Bandarenka of Pershamaiski District Court, FIDH appointed a delegation composed of Ms. Souhayr Belhassen, FIDH Chief Executive Officer, Mr. Antoine Bernard, Mr. Patrick Baudouin and 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Ms. Shirin Ebadi, to attend the hearing in solidarity with its Vice-President and wrote to the Consulate of Belarus in Paris to apply for visas for its delegation.

Thereafter, the Consulate of Belarus requested FIDH to fill in and append several documents, including an official invitation from a registered Belarus organisation, a letter from the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs to support the visa request in case the invitation was a copy, a recommendation letter from the Belarus Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a recommendation letter from the Presiding Judge Siarhei Bandarenka himself. Such documents do not appear in the official list of documents to be provided for visa applications on the Belarus Consulate website. Nonetheless, on October 31, 2011, two urgent visa applications, instead of the four, on behalf of FIDH President and Honorary President, were submitted with full officially requested documentation.

The Consulate of Belarus then informed FIDH representatives that it would be difficult to grant the requested visas as they already had more than 200 visa applications to process for November 1, 2011, from two teams of French sportsmen and a group of journalists. However, according to the official stamp put in the FIDH representatives' passports, the authorities of Belarus rejected the applications on October 31, without providing any reason.

The Observatory takes note of this refusal by Belarus authorities to grant visas to FIDH President and Honorary President and considers it as another example of their constant violation of human rights defenders' rights as well as a blatant demonstration that they fear that an independent observation of the trial of Mr. Ales Bialiatski would lead to the report of violations of the due process of law.

The Observatory urges the authorities to comply with Belarus' commitments under Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which states that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels". The Observatory calls upon the Belarusian State to release Mr. Ales Bialiatski immediately and drop all charges against him, as his detention and judicial harassment seem to merely aim at sanctioning his human rights activities.

For more information on this case, please see: <http://freeales.fidh.net/> as well as the previous Urgent Interventions issued by the Observatory.

Contacts:

- **FIDH : Karine Appy / Arthur Manet: + 33 1 43 55 25 18**
- **OMCT : Delphine Reculeau: + 41 22 809 49 39**