

**Karel Schwarzenberg**  
Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic  
President of the Council of the European Union

Brussels, 24 March 2009  
Our Ref: B851

Dear Mr Schwarzenberg,

**Subject: Towards abolition of the death penalty in Belarus**

Over the past five months, the EU has embarked on a new period of engagement with Belarus, including the suspension of travel restrictions, increased bilateral political dialogue and technical cooperation with the Belarusian authorities, and the prospect of the country's inclusion in the new Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, the General Affairs and External Relations Council of 16 March 2009 specifically recommended the launch of a human rights dialogue with Belarus in the near future.

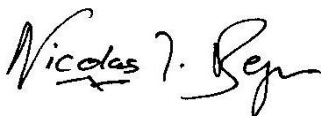
However, Belarus is the only country in Europe and the former Soviet Union that still carries out executions. All information on the death penalty in Belarus is kept secret, and there are no available statistics on the number of executions. Amnesty International estimates that as many as 400 people may have been executed since Belarus gained its independence in 1991. At least four people were executed and one more sentenced to death in 2008. Prisoners on death row are told they will be executed only moments before the sentence is carried out. They are shot in the back of the head, and the body is not handed over to the family, who are informed only after the event. The place of burial is kept secret, causing further distress to relatives. Further information on the continued use of the death penalty in Belarus can be found in the attached report, "*Ending executions in Europe: towards abolition of the death penalty in Belarus*" (EUR 49/001/2009), published on 24 March 2009.

In this context, and given the importance placed by the EU on abolition of the death penalty as a matter of principle, Amnesty International strongly urges the Presidency to use all new opportunities to press the Belarusian authorities to abolish the death penalty as a priority action. In particular, the Presidency should use all political dialogues and negotiations, including the planned human rights dialogue, to obtain commitments from the Belarusian authorities to:

- immediately establish a moratorium on all death sentences and executions with a view to abolishing the death penalty (as provided by the UN General Assembly resolution 62/149 adopted on 18 December 2007);
- commute without delay the sentences of all prisoners currently on death row to terms of imprisonment;
- bring domestic legislation into line with the country's obligations under international human rights treaties and ensure that the internationally recognised standards for fair trials are rigorously respected.

Amnesty International remains at your disposal to discuss this issue in greater depth.

Yours sincerely,



Nicolas Beger

*Director*  
*Amnesty International EU Office*



Dáša van der Horst

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