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CARDIN, U.S. DELEGATION SECURE RELEASE OF U.S. PRISONER IN BELARUS

Remind President Lukashenka Reforms Still Needed

MINSK, BELARUS—At the urging of **U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD)**, Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission) and a seven-member Congressional delegation in Minsk today, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka signed official documents releasing American prisoner Emanuel Zeltser.

Mr. Zeltser has been in a Belarus prison since March 2008 after being convicted in a secret trial. Arrangements are being made for Zeltser to be released tonight. Doctors have said that Mr. Zeltser's life depends on his release. The Helsinki Commission has consistently advocated for his release due to concerns over Zeltser's health and the fact he was convicted of espionage in a closed trial.

Despite the gesture, Chairman Cardin reminded President Lukashenka that improvements in human rights and democracy in Belarus remain critical to changing the U.S. relationship with the former Soviet state.

“We welcome the release of Emanuel Zeltser on humanitarian grounds. However, we made it clear to President Lukashenka today that the only way to improve the relationship between our countries is for him to increase political freedom and respect for human rights,” said **Chairman Cardin**. “Belarus should make progress on the conditions laid out in the Belarus Democracy Act if the country is to see any changes in U.S. sanctions here.”

The delegation also met today with political activists – several of whom have been imprisoned for opposing President Lukashenka. Political opposition, non-government organizations, and independent media lack freedom in Belarus. In response to an expansion of U.S. sanctions against Belarus, President Lukashenka kicked out approximately 30 diplomats from Minsk last year. The U.S. Embassy is now down to a staff of five. The delegation today called for Belarus to allow for an increased U.S. diplomatic presence.

“There is much President Lukashenka can do to put Belarus back on a path toward positive engagement with the United States. One start would be to restore staffing of our embassy in Minsk, but more importantly the country needs to undergo political reform, including changes to make the 2011 elections free and fair,” said Senate Assistant Majority Leader **Dick Durbin (D-IL)**.

“The Helsinki Commission and the U.S. Congress have a long standing interest in Belarus’ democracy and independence. All the talking in the world doesn’t change the fact that President Lukashenka must act. The ball is in his court,” said **Commission Ranking Minority Member Smith**, the author of the Belarus Democracy Act in the U.S. Congress.

The U.S. delegation included Chairman Cardin, Senator Durbin, Commission Ranking Minority Member Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ), Commissioner Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Commissioner Congressman Mike McIntyre (D-NC), Commissioner Congressman Robert Aderholt (R-AL), and Congressman Lloyd Doggett (D-TX).

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 56 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.