Belarus press crackdown draws international protest

PARIS, FRANCE; DARMSTADT, GERMANY: The World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) has protested to Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko against the detention of more than 20 journalists following demonstrations over his re-election. Those detained include a Russian reporter who was beaten and forcibly taken by riot police while on the air in a radio broadcast.

In a letter to the president, the global organisation of the world's press called for the immediate release of the journalists and for Lukashenko "to take all necessary steps to ensure that in future your government upholds international standards of freedom of expression and freedom of the press."

The crackdown on the independent press in Europe's last dictatorship followed mass protests against the December 19 presidential election in which Lukashenko was elected to a fourth five-year term.

Detained, beaten, charged

More than 20 journalists were arrested and many beaten after covering demonstrations in Minsk to protest against the presidential vote, which demonstrators claim was flawed. Over the New Year holidays, police raided the homes of numerous journalists, detaining suspects and seizing computers and other equipment.

Journalists arrested include Irina Khalip and Natalya Radina, who have been indicted on charges of organising and participating in mass disorder charges which respectively carry prison terms of up to 15 and eight years.

Khalip, a local correspondent for the Moscow-based independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, was beaten and forcibly taken by riot police while on the air with the independent Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy. Radina, editor of *Charter 97*, was beaten and detained when special forces stormed the website's offices and took her and the three volunteers staffing the newsroom.

The full letter to President Lukashenko can be found at www.wan-press.org/article18762.html. Find more WAN-IFRA protest campaigns at www.wan-press.org/pfreedom/home.php.