

NGO UPDATE

To foster communication among human rights organizations around the world, each issue of the Human Rights Brief features an “NGO Update.” This space was created to aid non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by informing others about their programs, successes, and challenges. The views of the organizations below do not necessarily reflect those of the Human Rights Brief. For information on how to submit updates for your organization, please contact us at hrbrief@wcl.american.edu.

BELARUS DENIES REGISTRATION OF NGO, AGAIN

Despite continued efforts to improve relations with the European Union, the Ministry of Justice of Belarus decided on March 2, 2009 to deny state registration of Nasha Viasna, a prominent non-governmental organization working to promote the development of civic society and expand the protections of democratic values and human rights. To justify its denial, the head of the Ministry’s Public Organizations Department, cited “discrepancies in the information” presented in the organization’s January 26, 2009 application. Nasha Viasna, however, calls the Ministry’s decision a “groundless and unlawful” violation of both the constitutional right to association and international commitments made by Belarus to improve its respect for human rights. Additionally, Nasha Viasna believes the registration denial illustrates the systematic and politically motivated discrimination against the organization’s members, many of whom are prominent activists who continuously face arbitrary and politically motivated arrest and detention.

The Ministry’s decision is only the latest in a series of actions taken against this organization. Nasha Viasna, or Our Spring, is the successor of the Human Rights Center Viasna (HRC), established in 1996 to aid demonstrators arrested during mass political protests. Following its participation in observing the 2001 presidential election, the Supreme Court of Belarus, in October 2003, cancelled the HRC’s

registration. After its liquidation, the organization struggled unsuccessfully to regain state registration. In July 2007, the United Nations Human Rights Committee adopted a resolution stating the forced closure of the HRC was a violation of Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and urged Belarus to re-register and compensate the organization. Despite the Committee’s resolution, the HRC unsuccessfully re-applied for registration in August 2007.

Nasha Viasna’s story is not unique. While Belarus’ constitution provides for the freedom of association, the government severely restricts its practice. Organizations critical of President Alexander Lukashenko face severe challenges to registration and operation, including expensive registration fees and strict, and often trivial, legal requirements. Those that fail to meet these requirements are denied registration or disbanded. According to the Assembly of Democratic NGOs, in the last four years, more than 300 NGOs were either closed by the government or forced to disband for a variety of legal and politically motivated reasons. The Assembly itself was denied registration on April 11, 2009.

The struggle of NGOs has not gone unnoticed by the international community. In its 2008 Human Rights Report, the U.S. State Department noted that “authorities [in Belarus] harassed NGOs with frequent inspections and threats of deregistration and monitored their correspondence and telephone conversations.” The United Kingdom’s annual human rights report stated that the position of NGOs in Belarus “remains poor.” In a January 7, 2009 resolution, the European Parliament called for Belarus to improve conditions governing the registration of NGOs, specifically mentioning Nasha Viasna.

According to Nasha Viasna co-founder Valiantsin Stefanovich, the organization intends to fully challenge the Ministry of Justice’s decision. On March 20, 2009, Nasha Viasna filed a formal complaint with the Supreme Court of Belarus. The Court will consider Nasha Viasna’s complaint beginning April 7, 2009. In addition,

on March 29, 2009, the organization held a second meeting of its founders and intends to re-apply for registration. In the meantime, however, Nasha Viasna’s members face serious risks of criminal prosecution for violating Belarus’ Criminal Code’s prohibition on acting on behalf of an unregistered organization.

BREAKTHROUGH
www.breakthrough.tv

Fade in on a young man reading his newspaper. Over his music, the sound of violent yelling between a husband and wife emanates from a neighboring apartment. The man puts on his shirt, walks over to his neighbor’s door and rings the bell. When the husband answers, the young man asks for a glass of milk. By the time the husband returns to the door the young man is gone; the yelling, however, stops. This commercial is part of Breakthrough’s latest media campaign, Bell Bajao or Ring the Bell, which calls on men to take a stand against the growing problem of domestic violence in India.

Founded by human rights activist Malika Dutt, Breakthrough is a transnational human rights organization which uses media and popular culture tools in cooperation with leadership training to raise awareness about human rights abuses. Breakthrough currently works in both India and the United States on several issues, including violence against women, immigrant rights, HIV/AIDS awareness, and racial justice. To educate the next generation of human rights activists, Breakthrough develops original multimedia, such as videogames, advertisements, animations, blogs, and music videos. Former United Nations Undersecretary General Shashi Tharoor calls this approach “visionary and innovative.”

In the United States, Breakthrough focuses primarily on the denial of basic due process rights to immigrants. In October 2008, as part of its web campaign “End Homeland Gitmos,” Breakthrough released an interactive videogame. The game casts the player as an undercover reporter seek-

ing clues into the death of Boubacar Bah, an actual immigrant who suffered a skull fracture and brain hemorrhages in the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey. The player walks through a simulated detention center, encountering along the way other detained immigrants who share their stories. All information is backed by links to videos, newspaper articles, and court documents.

Breakthrough's success comes from its ability to take advantage of the latest technological trends to broadcast its message. In addition to its own website, Breakthrough's media campaigns can be accessed on YouTube, a video sharing website, and social-networking websites Facebook and MySpace. Breakthrough also recently began using Twitter, a micro-blogging service that enables users to send short updates to subscribers. These tactics allow for effortless exposure to the greatest number of individuals.

In addition, Breakthrough builds strong partnerships with other organizations. In 2007, Breakthrough launched a multimedia campaign in India called "Is This Justice?" The award winning campaign brought attention to the increasing numbers of women living with HIV/AIDS rendered homeless because of stigma and discrimination. Breakthrough scouted advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather to create the campaign pro bono and partnered with numerous TV, radio, print and online outlets to disseminate the campaign in several Indian languages. As a result, Breakthrough estimates the campaign reached and educated over 34 million people through television, 29 million people through print, and 18 million people through radio.

To some, the presence of valuable natural resources is a blessing. To others, it is a curse. Due to weak governance, natural resources extraction often creates an unusual paradox, bringing a country poverty and conflict, instead of prosperity and peace. To correct this inconsistency, Global Witness investigates and campaigns to prevent the outbreak of natural resource based conflict and its associated environmental and human rights abuses.

Established in 1993, Global Witness currently operates from offices in Washington, DC and London. Global Witness' campaigns span a wide variety of topics, including combating forest exploitation, corruption in oil, gas and mining revenues, and impunity for those who facilitate natural resource conflicts. The organization's methodology combines investigative research with targeted campaigning. Global Witness begins by conducting in-depth, first-hand investigations into incidents of conflict and corruption. The detailed findings are published in investigative reports and policy briefings, and distributed to governments, civil society and the media. Global Witness then works with the international community, including the World Bank and the United Nations Security Council, to both instigate the reforms necessary to improve natural resource management and outlaw practices that encourage human rights abuses.

Global Witness' investigations and advocacy campaigns have been the catalyst behind several international mechanisms established to regulate natural resource trading. One of Global Witness' most notable achievements was its exposure of the West African "blood-diamond" trade. Sub-

sequently, Global Witness was a main driver in the establishment of the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, used to certify the origin of rough diamonds from sources free from conflict. In addition, Global Witness is a leading participant in the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, a major international program ensuring natural resource revenue transparency.

In its latest report entitled "Undue Diligence: How banks do business with corrupt regimes", Global Witness explores the financial links between the world's largest banks and the most corrupt regimes. By accepting these customers, the report concludes that banks facilitate corruption and looting of natural resource revenues. According to Gavin Hayman, Global Witness' Campaigns Director, "if resources like oil, gas and minerals are to truly help lift Africa . . . governments must take responsibility to stop banks doing business with corrupt dictators and their families." The report sets out due diligence reforms which governments, regulators and banks must make in order to tackle this destabilizing influence.

Global Witness' work has not gone unrecognized. In 2003, Global Witness was co-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for its leading work on conflict diamonds. In its nominating letter, three United States congressmen complemented Global Witness' "creative advocacy" and "unflagging persistence." In addition, the organization received the 2007 Commitment to Development Award, which honors individuals or organizations who raise the public's awareness of developing countries. **HRB**

Lindsey Randall, a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law, writes the NGO Update for the Human Rights Brief.