

Ladies and gentlemen,

Mr Chairman,

Thank you for inviting me to speak and for the opportunity to express the position of a Belarusian environmental association (specifically, the NGO Ecohome) on Belarus's compliance with the Aarhus Convention and on the Committee's recommendations, in particular with regard to the case of the construction of a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Belarus.

I would like to start by commenting on the last letter from the Belarusian Ministry of the Environment to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee.

We welcome the Belarusian Ministry of the Environment's initiatives to amend legislation in order to implement the Committee's recommendations. We would also like to mention some individual positive moves – representatives of the public concerned were given access to the text of the Draft Law to introduce amendments and additions to some laws of the Republic of Belarus with regard to environmental protection and also to public participation in environmentally significant decision-making and public access to environmental information, and have been able to submit their suggestions to the drafters. We very much hope that these will be taken into account, and we are also submitting them to the Committee. However, we are worried about the complete lack of clarity of the procedure for considering them.

We are also extremely worried by continuing breaches of the Aarhus Convention in Belarus in 2013 with regard to legislative activity. Thus, on 22 January, the President of Belarus signed the Law of the Republic of Belarus to introduce amendments to some laws with regard to environmental protection. This law was not discussed with the public as the Aarhus Convention requires. The same is true as regards the Regulations on Public Environmental Specialists adopted in the spring of this year. We have also not seen the plan for introducing amendments to legislation, about which Galina Volchuga has just spoken.

We welcome the actions of the Ministry of the Environment of Belarus in cooperating with other government bodies in the aim of complying with the Aarhus Convention. However, this cooperation has not yet produced any practical results, in particular on the issue of building an NPP. Thus, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) has replied to the Ministry of the Environment's queries about the arrests and detentions of anti-nuclear activists in August last year by claiming that it is impossible to establish any connection between the arrests and the activists' public activities, despite the fact that this connection is more than obvious and is manifested on the name list and also in the time and place of detention, as well as in the false nature of the charges (use of obscene language in a public place). The Ministry of the Environment's explanations to the MVD have not changed the continued practice of persecuting activists – this year, at the time of the officially permitted 'Chernobyl Way' rally, anti-nuclear and environmental activists Irina Sukhiy, Vasiliy Sinyukhin, Olga Kaskevich and Konstantin Kirilenko appear to have been detained. I was one of the official organisers of this rally; however police and KGB officers blockaded me into my flat, preventing me from participating in this action.

Moreover, the police and the KGB have started to prevent citizens from obtaining environmental information relating to the construction of an NPP. Thus, in the summer

of this year, the Ostrovets district (raion) security forces prevented some young environmental activists from visiting the NPP Information Centre in Ostrovets. Despite their having agreed the visit in advance with the Centre's staff, on 12 July this year, the Information Centre was shut and a group of young people was taken under the control of the police and the KGB – they accompanied the group of activists until they left the Ostrovets district.

We welcome the actions of the Ministry of the Environment in training state officials on compliance with the Aarhus Convention, but we note that the principles of the Convention have not yet been implemented by these officials. This is demonstrated in refusals to provide environmental information on the basis that the information requested is purportedly not environmental. In the opinion of Belarusian civil servants, the only thing that constitutes environmental information is an EIA. The clearest example is that of requests concerning the grounds for constructing an NPP. Works began on pouring the concrete for the foundation trenches under the reactor blocks before the architectural plan and licenses appeared and before the President of Belarus's Edict on the construction was issued – all of which is contrary to the legislation. However, all queries from the public concerned (in particular, Ecohome and the Belarusian Green Party) about the grounds for construction were met with the answer that this information was not environmental information and could not be provided.

We wish to draw attention to these breaches of the provisions of the Convention by Belarus in building an NPP. We also wish to add that the edict on the construction of an NPP currently in preparation is not being discussed with the public, and that procedures carried out in breach of the Convention (such as the hearings in Ostrovets) are not being repeated. Thus, Belarus is demonstrating to other countries that a Party to the Convention can put environmentally significant projects into effect with serious breaches of the Convention.

We believe that Belarus's experience with regard to implementation of the Committee's recommendations (specifically with regard to the construction of an NPP) must be taken into account when further recommendations are drafted for our country. The recommendations of the Espoo Committee that, where serious breaches of the provisions of that Convention have been noted, procedures should be repeated and decisions reviewed offer an example here. In this sense, it would also be useful for Belarus not only to repeat the EIA procedures relating to the Ostrovets NPP in accordance with the Aarhus Convention procedures, but also to review relevant decisions connected with the construction of an NPP.

In addition, we hope that the persecution of anti-nuclear activists will be assessed on a relevant, appropriate basis. We are also looking at the possibility of submitting a separate complaint to the Committee about this issue.

Thank you for your attention.

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