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United States
of America

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE *111th* CONGRESS, 1st SESSION

Vol. 154 Washington, Wednesday, February 11, 2009 *No. 3*

Senate

BELARUS IMPRISONMENT

HON. BENJAMIN L. CARDIN
Wednesday, February 11, 2009

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, as chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I would like to bring to the attention of the Senate a situation which is literally a matter of life and death for an American citizen, Emanuel Zeltser, who has been imprisoned in Belarus since March 12, 2008. Mr. Zeltser is in desperate and immediate need of serious medical treatment—including a coronary bypass operation.

The poor human rights record of President Lukashenka's regime is well known. No American—indeed no human being—should be subjected to the kind of treatment Mr. Zeltser has been forced to endure during his incarceration. Despite Mr. Zeltser's grave health condition—he suffers from heart disease, type 2 diabetes, severe arthritis, gout, and dangerously elevated blood pressure—Belarusian authorities have repeatedly refused to provide Mr. Zeltser with his prescribed medications.

He was initially denied two independent medical evaluations and he has reported being physically assaulted and abused while incarcerated. Amnesty International has urged that Belarusian authorities no longer subject Mr. Zeltser to "further torture and other ill-treatment."

Mr. Zeltser was convicted of "using false official documents" and "attempted economic espionage" in a closed judicial proceeding. The U.S. Embassy in Minsk criticized the proceedings, noting that it was denied the opportunity to observe the trial. The State Department has repeatedly called for Mr. Zeltser's release on humanitarian grounds. So have others in Congress, especially my colleague on the Helsinki Commission, cochairman Representative Alcee Hastings.

But now the situation appears dire. Earlier this month, Mr. Zeltser was examined by an American doctor. It was only the second time an American physician has been permitted to see Mr. Zeltser. The doctor concluded that "there is a clear and high risk of sudden death from heart attack unless the patient is immediately transferred to a U.S. hospital with the proper equipment and facilities. Refusal to transfer Mr. Zeltser to a U.S. hospital is equivalent to a death sentence." Specifically, Mr. Zeltser is in dire need of a coronary bypass procedure. The doctor also determined that because he had been denied prescribed diabetes medication, Mr. Zeltser's left foot may need to be amputated.

In response to a press inquiry in December, the State Department called for "the Belarusian authorities to release Mr. Zeltser on humanitarian grounds before this situation takes an irrevocable turn." Based on the recent doctor's report it is apparent that such an irrevocable turn is imminent unless this American citizen can be brought home promptly for the medical treatment necessary to save his life.

Belarus has taken some tentative steps to improve its notably poor human rights record, in particular the release of several political prisoners last August. However, Mr. Zeltser's continued, and potentially terminal, imprisonment threatens to override those initially encouraging signs. As such, I strongly urge the Belarusian authorities to release Emanuel Zeltser on humanitarian grounds so that he may obtain the immediate medical treatment his doctor has concluded is required if he is to live.

Countries
Belarus

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