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# US Steps Up Pressure on Belarus

By Michael Drudge

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Condoleezza Rice

*The United States has issued a call for free and fair elections in Belarus next year. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says it is time for change in what she calls Europe's "last true dictatorship."*

The United States has pushed Belarus high up its agenda for democratic change during Secretary Rice's just-concluded trip to Europe.

Speaking at the end of a NATO meeting in Lithuania, Ms. Rice told reporters the United States will push hard for free and fair elections in Belarus next year.

"We will support the idea that elections, when they are held, should be real elections," she said. "They should not be sham elections and the international community ought to be prepared and ready to help Belarus to carry out free and fair elections in 2006."

She addressed the subject shortly after a meeting with Belarussian dissidents opposed to the hard-line President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled the eastern European country since 1994.

Ms. Rice told the group the United States admires their courage and determination. The dissidents said they are making plans for mass street protests like those that brought democratic change to Georgia and Ukraine.

At her news conference, Ms. Rice was asked if the United States encourages such protests.

"I think that the people of Belarus will have to make their determinations about how they move forward," she said. "But the key here is that people ought to be able to protest, to speak their minds. These are principles that the United States has supported."

A day earlier, Ms. Rice had referred to the Lukashenko government as Europe's "last true dictatorship," a comment that drew sharp reaction from Russia, which has close ties to Belarus. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned against outside meddling.

"We would not be advocating what some people call regime changes anywhere," he said. "We think the democratic process, the process of reform, cannot be imposed from outside."

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, participated in Ms. Rice's meeting with the Belarussian dissidents in a sign of EU support for democratic reforms in Belarus.



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