

ABERDEEN - GOMEL LINKS IN MIND

The Aberdeen Gomel Trust has been very much in the mind of local SNP MEP, Ian Hudghton during recent European Parliament discussions on relations between Belarus and the EU. A country bordering three EU accession countries (Poland, Lithuania and Latvia), Belarus is perhaps better known in Aberdeen than elsewhere in Scotland through the Granite City's twinning links with Gomel. Mr Hudghton, whose office is in Rosemount Place, is acutely aware of the need to place dual emphasis on relations with Belarus. The need to condemn human rights violations on the one hand, while helping to strengthen links with ordinary Belarusian citizens on the other.

Commenting on the issue, Mr Hudghton said:

"MEPs are highly critical of the Belarusian authorities' record on human rights - severely criticising President Lukashenko's repressive regime, and reaffirming the EU's refusal to enter into bilateral agreements with Belarus until they clean up their act. This must include the release of prisoners of conscience.

"Belarus lives in the shadow of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster when a third of its territory was blighted. Lukashenko's regime is doing little to alleviate the plight of its victims. The jailing of nuclear expert Professor Yuri Bandazhevsky in 2001 speaks volumes. He fell foul of the authorities after publishing research into the effects of the disaster, which were unpalatable to the government. I have raised his case with the European Commission and the British Consulate in Minsk and Amnesty International is keeping a watching brief too.

"However just as important is the need to ensure that Belarusian citizens do not become marginalized. The Aberdeen Gomel Trust serves as an excellent model which has enabled ordinary Belarusians to meet with ordinary Scots. Exchange visits have resulted in the sharing of ideas and knowledge which have helped tackle shared problems. It is imperative that these links continue.

"The European Parliament's discussions brought into stark focus the problems our friends in Gomel face on a daily basis. We have a duty to nurture the links we have forged with them and do all we can here in Scotland to ensure that the authorities of Belarus get their act together on human rights in their country."

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