

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

9 August 2021 EUR 49/4562/2021

BELARUS: A YEAR OF ONGOING BRUTAL REPRISALS, FEAR AND SOLIDARITY

A year on from the presidential elections in Belarus over 30,000 people have been detained in violation of their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread. Hundreds of civil society activists, human rights defenders, protest participants and even bystanders have faced unfounded politically motivated prosecution and are either in prison or under house arrest. Furthermore, in July the government intensified an already ruthless attack on civil society, arbitrarily closing around 50 civil society organizations almost overnight.

The nature of the serious human rights violations committed in Belarus over a prolonged period, especially the widespread and systematic use of arbitrary arrest and detention to suppress protest, and the accompanying use of systematic torture and other ill treatment against detainees seen to be linked to the opposition – raises the reasonable conclusion that these violations are committed as part of an attack directed against the civilian population and may therefore amount to crimes against humanity. Yet in the face of such widespread human rights violations, people in Belarus have realized as never before the value of their rights being violated, and they have shown enormous courage and solidarity in defending them.

“I WOKE UP ON 10 AUGUST IN A NEW COUNTRY”

For many people the overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the protests and the brutality shown to protestors was an awakening. It made them realize how widespread and vicious human rights violations were in the country in which they were living. One trade unionist who has been forced to leave Belarus because of the threat of unfounded criminal prosecution for his trade union activities told Amnesty International:

I reached the point of no return. I went to bed on 9 August and I woke up on 10 August in a new country. I saw the horror that was happening around me and I understood that I could not be the person I was before. I could not go back.

Medical volunteers who helped treat the wounded protestors were confronted with the full horror of what was happening. A nurse who was later fired from her job and had to flee Belarus described her work during the first weeks of protests:

I saw all these mutilated people – with broken bones, with faces ripped to pieces, with swollen heads the size of a balloon. We weren't allowed to write down descriptions of injuries and were constantly threatened with reprisals. Still, every night after my shift I joined other peaceful protesters and stood shoulder to shoulder with other doctors and nurses.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Despite the horror of what was happening around them, many felt empowered and became aware of the role they could play in defending human rights. A professional actor who sustained serious spinal injuries from being beaten by police during a peaceful protest told Amnesty International: “Our mindset has changed. Suddenly everything has become ours – and we feel responsible for all of it too. Our local yard, our neighbourhood, our city, and, of course, our country too.”

Katsyaryna Snytnina, a medal winning basketball player and until March 2021 captain of the Belarusian national basketball team, who has since been exiled, told Amnesty International: “In 2020, I truly became a citizen. I took responsibility for what was going on in my country, and I understood that by being silent we were helping the regime.”

SOLIDARITY

People from across the whole of Belarusian society faced arrests and detentions – students and trade unionists, teachers and artists, medical workers and athletes, older people and children. These shared experiences of arrest and repression have brought people together.

An 83-year-old man who was detained for taking part in a protest recalled his interaction with another detainee:

A few steps away from me another detainee stood facing the wall. I showed him a hand sign and whispered 'Long Live Belarus'. He quietly replied: 'Live Forever'. A few hours later I was released. I don't know what happened to that man.

Yelena Leuchanka, an Olympic champion basketball player, recalled the strong emotions she felt behind bars when she sung with her cellmates and detainees from other cells joined in.

COURAGE

Above all, in the past year the people of Belarus have shown their courage in the face of fear and brutality unleashed by the authorities against peaceful protesters and dissenters. They have put their livelihoods and even their freedom at stake to fight for their human rights. Yury Korzun, a miner at the state-run Belarus potash mine, chained himself to a piece of equipment 300 meters underground demanding an end to reprisals against peaceful protesters and striking miners.

Many workers at state factories realized that the state-run unions were not fighting for their rights and joined independent unions such as the Belarusian Independent Union (BNP). They took this step in the knowledge that it could lead to reprisals, as one trade unionist told Amnesty International:

By joining the BNP we were putting a target on our backs. It is hard to be a target for beating. We wanted to be seen. We wanted people to know that our rights had been violated and we wanted to defend our rights. In some cases the fear of not being heard overcame the fear of losing your job.

Again and again ordinary people risked their own physical integrity to stand up for their rights. The wife of an imprisoned furniture repairman told Amnesty International:

Every time my husband returned home from detention he told me that he was doing it for us, for our future. We are very scared but we are also very proud of him. Our daughter keeps saying: "In a couple of years they will write about my dad in books. But I really want to see him now."

As the embodiment of the indomitable spirit of Belarusian people, Maryia Kalesnikava, danced in the defendant's cage in the courtroom at the opening of her trial on 4 August. She is facing up to 12 years in prison for her peaceful opposition activities and her role in the election campaign of Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya who challenged the incumbent Alyaskandr Lukashenka in the momentous 9 August 2020 presidential election.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE BELARUSIAN AUTHORITIES TO:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Maryia Kalesnikava and hundreds of other individuals detained as criminal suspects or imprisoned solely for exercising their human rights, including the rights to freedom peaceful assembly and expression;
- Cooperate fully with international partners and organizations, including in particular the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UNHRC Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Belarus, and the OSCE Moscow Mechanism Rapporteur on Human Rights.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY SHOULD:

- Undertake a comprehensive examination of all available and potential accountability options, including where appropriate through criminal jurisdictions applying universal jurisdiction, to adjudicate allegations of the deliberate use of unlawful and sometimes lethal force, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, and other ill-treatment by members of Belarusian law enforcement, and assess options for expanding such jurisdictions;
- Assist and support initiatives to assist survivors of torture and other human rights violations from Belarus and key witnesses, including by granting them international protection if required and facilitating their free movement.