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Belarus: Belarus must end repression against peaceful protestors

Amnesty International strongly condemns the current clampdown on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Belarus.

Local human rights defenders estimate that over 150 people have been prosecuted and fined under articles of the Code of Administrative Offences, predominantly Article 23.34 (“violation of the organisation or holding of mass events”), following their peaceful participation in protests in November and December 2019. The rules governing public assemblies in Belarus are unduly restrictive.

An initial wave of arrests took place during the parliamentary election campaign period in November in response to opposition protests and meetings across Belarus. Peaceful protestors, opposition parliamentary candidates and members of their campaign teams, as well as journalists and bloggers were arrested, and then sentenced to periods of administrative detention or fined, as penalties. One blogger, Ales Krutkin, was sentenced to 15 days’ administrative detention for simply posting a call to protest on Facebook.

Despite the clampdown, protests continued across Belarus in December, in response to Putin’s meeting with President Lukashenka to discuss the possibility of deeper integration between Belarus and Russia.

A second wave of arrests has seen dozens of peaceful protestors being fined over US\$ 600 and/or sentenced to periods of administrative detention of between five and 15 days with some still serving sentences at the time of writing. Hearings continued throughout December and January and are ongoing in February with more sentences and fines expected.

Prominent figures, such as the well-known Belarusian blogger, Dzmitry Kazlou, and the opposition politician Pavel Sevyaryniets, have been given a number of consecutive sentences of 15 days’ administrative detention, for purported multiple “administrative offences”. On 27 January, Dzmitry Kazlou was given his eighth consecutive sentence, bringing the total number of days of administrative detention to 120.

Others, such as civil society activist, Piotr Markelau, or parliamentary candidate, Stanislau Shashok, were arbitrarily denied access to their legal representatives for days following their arrest and detention. Numerous requests for meetings with their lawyers were rejected on such pretexts as there being no meeting rooms available. Piotr Markelau told Amnesty International that he felt as though he had no rights while in detention and said the penitentiary authorities even took away his mattress for 36 hours and left him with just metal grills to sleep on.

The rights to freedom of expression and to peaceful protest are freedoms that must be fully respected by the authorities in Belarus. The Belarusian authorities must immediately end all administrative proceedings against peaceful protestors. All those currently serving administrative detention sentences in connection with their attempt to exercise their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression should be immediately and unconditionally released, and all fines issued to peaceful protestors should be immediately withdrawn.

Background

The Belarusian authorities continue to violate the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly despite repeated calls from civil society and the international community to ensure their protection and promotion.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus has repeatedly called the country's authorities to respect fundamental freedoms and reiterated her call ahead of the parliamentary elections in November 2019.¹ Belarus has consistently refused to recognise the mandate of the Special Rapporteur.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25161&LangID=E>