

URGENT ACTION

CHILDREN'S HOSPICE AT RISK, DIRECTOR TARGETED

Volha Vialichka, the director of the Belarusian Hrodna children's hospice, is being targeted by the authorities following her role as an independent observer during the disputed August presidential elections in Belarus, and her public criticism of the authorities. The hospice, which provides vital care to terminally ill children, now risks closure as a result of the harassment of its director.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Uladzimir Stsyapanavich Karanik

Head of the Hrodna Regional Executive Committee

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Dear Mr Karanik,

*I am deeply concerned about the relentless harassment of **Volha Vialichka** in retaliation for her criticism of the authorities, targeting her and her family, but also the Hrodna children's hospice of which she is the director. The hospice currently provides essential care that is not available anywhere else in Hrodna, including habilitative, psychological and social care, to 70 terminally ill children as well as crucial support to their parents.*

Volha Vialichka volunteered as an independent observer for the 9 August presidential elections. Since, she has voiced her criticism in response to the rapid deterioration of the human rights situation in Belarus, and the authorities' subsequent crackdown of peaceful protesters that ensued after the widely disputed official election results.

On 9 September Volha Vialichka was arrested while fundraising at a street charity event and spent 24 hours in detention. Shortly after, representatives from the school of her 14-year-old son requested to meet Volha Vialichka over their concerns about "family wellbeing" and Volha Vialichka's son's "home environment". On 15 October Volha Vialichka was fined for participating in the above-mentioned charity event under Part 1 of the article 23.34 of the Administrative Code of the Republic of Belarus.

Since September the children's hospice that Volha Vialichka is the director of, has also become a target of the authorities. The hospice has been operating successfully and has fulfilled its financial obligations since 2008, and in March 2020 it went through a successful financial audit. Currently, the hospice's operations have been halted in two of the three premises it uses. Since 29 September the hospice's staff have been banned from entering the premises of a state-run factory where they rented rooms to run a volunteering centre. To date the hospice staff have been unable to collect hospice property from the factory building that includes important medical equipment and documentation. On 22 October, the state-run Children's Hospital No. 2 unexpectedly notified Volha Vialichka that the rental agreement for a number of rooms the hospice used to provide care to the children was being terminated. On the same date, the hospice management was visited by representatives from the Financial Investigations Department who seized the hospice's laptop and documentation, and later launched an ongoing fraud investigation against Volha Vialichka.

In the light of the above, I urge you to ensure that the harassment of Volha Vialichka stops and that the Hrodna children's hospice can continue to provide essential medical care to terminally ill children as well as continue to support their families.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The harassment against Volha Vialichka and the targeting of the Hrodna's children hospice that she directs comes in the context of a drastic deterioration in the human rights situation in Belarus. During the electoral campaign period and following the presidential election on 9 August, there have been mass peaceful protests including against the widely disputed official results. Throughout, the authorities have engaged in an escalating campaign against the opposition and all dissenting voices. Thousands of people have been arbitrarily arrested by police, an overwhelming majority of them peaceful protesters or bystanders, and many apprehended in abduction-style arrest by masked plain-clothed men. Amnesty has been calling for the immediate release of all those detained for exercising their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression, and an end to all other human rights violations, including the dispersal of peaceful assemblies, mass arrests and the widespread ill-treatment and torture of detainees (see: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/belarus-mounting-evidence-of-a-campaign-of-widespread-torture-of-peaceful-protesters/>)

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Belarusian, Russian.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 20 January 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Volha Vialichka (she/her)