

21 February 2022

To Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the UN Human Rights Council:

Excellency,

The Human Rights Council will consider the possible renewal of the mandate of the OHCHR examination of the human rights situation in Belarus at its 49th session.

We, the undersigned national, international and Belarusian organisations, urge your delegation to support the renewal of this mandate, which is critical for maintaining scrutiny on Belarus's human rights crisis.

The human rights situation in Belarus which necessitated Council action in 2021 is deteriorating. There are continuing cases of arbitrary detention and arrest, torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and unfair and closed trials on trumped-up charges against persons perceived by the authorities as being critical of the government.

As of 1 February 2022, well over 1000 prisoners are recognized as "political prisoners" by the Belarusian human rights organisation Viasna. However, the number of those detained for political reasons is much higher and might reach as many as 5,000. Torture and ill-treatment of those detained continue, with the objective of eliciting forced "confessions", and punishing and silencing those carrying out human rights and civic activities.

In 2021, civil society came under prolonged systematic attack by the Belarusian authorities. The government liquidated at least 275 civil society organisations, including all independent human rights organisations. Authorities have initiated criminal cases against 13 human rights defenders, 12 of whom have been detained.

Legislative amendments to the Criminal Code adopted in December 2021 re-introduced criminal liability for "acting on behalf of unregistered or liquidated organisations." The liquidation of all independent human rights organisations by the authorities has therefore led to a *de facto* criminalisation of human rights work. Independent media also face systematic persecution, with journalists frequently being labelled as "extremist", targeted under defamation charges, and blocked from publishing. At least 31 journalists and media workers remain behind bars on criminal charges and at least 22 lawyers have been disbarred by Belarusian authorities on political grounds or because of their representation of defendants in politically sensitive cases. In addition, Belarus is considering introducing criminal proceedings *in absentia*, with implications for those who have fled the country.

Those who are subject to human rights violations in Belarus do not currently have any effective legal remedies or recourse to justice, and look to the United Nations Human Rights Council to ensure an accountability process for serious human rights violations.

At the 46th session, the Human Rights Council mandated the OHCHR to conduct an examination. This was a welcome development given the widespread and systematic, human rights violations that occurred in Belarus in the context of 2020's presidential election, and the environment of impunity and lack of accountability within which they occurred.

Unfortunately, the OHCHR examination received only around 50 per cent of the budget for its work in 2021 against what was originally approved by the Council at HRC46. It became fully operational only in the final months of 2021. Despite these challenges, the OHCHR examination is still expected to provide a report to the Human Rights Council at the 49th session.

Given the current dire human rights situation in Belarus, and the ongoing importance and unique nature of the OHCHR examination, we call on this Council to renew the mandate at HRC49, and ensure its work is sufficiently resourced and funded.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration,

Signed

- Amnesty International
- ARTICLE 19
- The Barys Zvozkau Belarusian Human Rights House
- CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
- Civil Rights Defenders
- FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Human Rights Watch
- IFEX
- Index on Censorship
- International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
- International Commission of Jurists
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)