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Four convicted over Belarus protests

Amnesty International has today condemned the conviction of four Belarusian prisoners of conscience, including former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau, over their involvement in post-election protests.

A court in Minsk sentenced Andrei Sannikau, who has complained of torture and other ill-treatment during his detention, to five years' imprisonment on Saturday for his role in protests that followed presidential elections in December 2010.

Andrei Sannikau's wife, journalist Iryna Khalip, who also took part in the December protests, was given a two-year suspended sentence on Monday, charged with breaching public order.

Pavel Sevarnyets and Syargei Martseleu were also sentenced to three years in a correctional facility and two years' probation, respectively. Both were charged with breaching public order.

"Andrei Sannikau and these other activists have been convicted solely for exercising their right to peaceful protest," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"They must be released immediately and unconditionally. Their imprisonment is yet another example of the Belarusian government's relentless clampdown on any form of dissent," he added.

Following the Belarusian presidential election on 19 December, more than 30,000 people gathered in the centre of the capital Minsk to protest against election rigging and show support for opposition candidates.

When a violent incident broke out at the doors of Government House, riot police moved in to disperse the crowds. Over 700 people were detained, the overwhelming majority of whom had been peaceful participants and bystanders.

Amnesty International has documented the cases of eight prisoners of conscience detained by the Belarusian authorities over the demonstration who have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

"This is outrageous. The crème de la crème of the country is being wiped out," Andrei Sannikau's sister and human rights activist Irina Bogdanova told Amnesty International today.

"My brother was experiencing such physical discomfort from his injuries that he was unable to sit down during the trial," she said before the sentencing.

Andrei Sannikau has said that when he was first detained on 19 December, he was beaten and denied access to the toilet for hours.

Every day he was made to carry all his personal belongings to a cold cellar where he was forced to stand naked by the wall, with arms and legs outstretched for long periods and made to squat. Men in masks would psychologically intimidate him and kick him.

Despite complaining of a painful leg, he was not allowed to change position, he added.

He said that when he refused to confess, according to the authorities' demands, the head of the KGB, Belarus' intelligence agency, threatened that "more brutal measures" would be applied against his wife and child.

Aware that his wife was also in the detention centre and that efforts were being made to take his son into care, he took the threats seriously and tried to cooperate.

He was also refused access to a lawyer and only able to meet with a lawyer in private on 22 March, more than three months after his detention. For one month, he was not able to send or receive letters and says that throughout his detention he has been isolated from outside information.