



BELARUS

Calls For End To Violence Against Protesters In Belarus Grow At UN As Nationwide Strike Begins

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By RFE/RL

The UN human rights investigator for Belarus has demanded that the government "stop repressing its own people," referring to thousands detained during protests against Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

The demand made by Anais Marin, UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus, came after the start of a nationwide strike called by the opposition during which hundreds more were detained.

Marin told the Human Rights Committee that at least 20,000 people were detained in August and September and hundreds reported being beaten, intimidated, tortured, or ill-treated while in custody.

Marin quoted sources in the Interior Ministry and nongovernmental groups who said most detainees have faced administrative or criminal charges, citing more than 400 criminal cases against protesters since disputed elections on August 9.

Marin's appeal was echoed in a statement to the committee later from 52 mainly European countries and the European Union.

They also called for an end to violence against peaceful demonstrators and intimidation of opposition leaders, journalists, human rights defenders, and protesters to end along with abuses against people in the pro-democracy movement.

Belarus has been rocked by demonstrations against Lukashenka, whose reelection to a sixth term has been disputed by the opposition, which argues the vote was rigged.

The Belarusian opposition says the results of the August vote were fraudulent, and that opposition candidate Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya was the legitimate winner.

'Only Just Begun'

Tsikhanouskaya said the strike, called to ratchet up pressure on Lukashenka to resign, "has only just begun and will continue to strengthen."

She spoke in an interview with RFE/RL in the evening of October 26 after thousands of workers, students, and pensioners took to the streets across Belarus.

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Tsikhanouskaya: 'National Strike' In Belarus Has Only Just Begun

"I am proud of every Belarusian who found strength and courage and went on strike today," Tsikhanouskaya said, urging all her countrymen to join the protest.

Tsikhanouskaya spoke from Lithuania, where she has been living since shortly after the presidential election amid threats to her and her family.

"The strike did not fail, no matter what the supporters of the regime -- whom there are fewer and fewer -- say about it," the opposition leader also said.

Instead of accepting the opposition's call to leave by midnight on October 25, Lukashenka responded with another show of power, setting security forces upon the protesters on October 26.

More than 320 people were detained in Minsk, Hrodna, Brest, Mahilyou, Lida, and other Belarusian cities during the day, according to the [Vyasna human rights group](#), a day after riot police used stun grenades and rubber bullets against tens of thousands of protesters gathered across Belarus and detained hundreds.

Students in some universities on October 26 refused to attend lectures and marched in Minsk in protest, joining retirees in their regular Monday protest. Many shops and cafes were closed, with their owners and employees forming human chains in the capital.

Strikes also targeted large plants in Minsk and elsewhere, including national oil company Belarusneft, the world's largest producer of potash Belaruskali, and the MAZ truck-manufacturing plant.

According to Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, leader of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Unions, the authorities responded by detaining protesters in the streets and outside factories, and threatening workers with jail or being fired if they went on strike.

The statement to the UN Human Rights Committee from the 52 countries and EU supported “the democratic aspirations of the Belarusian people to choose their own path through free and fair elections” and strongly condemned the “crackdown carried out by Belarusian authorities against peaceful protesters.”

It expressed alarm at reports of “more than 500 cases of torture and other severe abuses including sexual violence in the postelection period” and at a number of arrested or detained people who remain unaccounted for.

The signatories urged Belarusian authorities to open a dialogue with opposition leaders and civil society.

“The Belarusian people have spoken and we support them in their calls for unrestricted dialogue, free and fair elections, accountability for human rights violations and abuses, and the release of all those arbitrarily detained,” the statement said.

With reporting by AP, Reuters, tut.by, RIA Novosti, dpa, and AFP

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