



Special Rapporteur on Torture
c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations Office at Geneva
CH-1211 Geneva 10 Switzerland

E-mail: urgent-action@ohchr.org

Geneva, 24 August 2020

Re: Widespread torture and arbitrary arrest of peaceful protesters in Belarus (9 to 14 August 2020)

Dear Excellency,

The Human Rights Center “Viasna”, the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC), the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) are writing to you to express their grave concern and to call upon your intervention in relation to the violent crackdown against peaceful protesters in the aftermath of the presidential elections held on 9 August 2020 in Belarus.

In the period from 9 to 14 August, state agents belonging to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Belarus committed numerous human rights abuses against thousands of protesters who took to the streets to demonstrate against the rigged presidential poll. In response, they were subjected to disproportionate and indiscriminate violence and to arbitrary arrest, in violation of the right to peaceful assembly, the right to freedom of expression, the right not to be subjected to arbitrary detention, the right not to be subjected to torture and to other types of cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment, and the right to life. Over 6,000 individuals were arrested, held in *incommunicado* detention for up to 10 days, with at least 450 of them beaten, humiliated and tortured by law enforcement personnel. The torture and ill-treatment appear widespread and endemic, and the law enforcement system had been prepared and trained for such brutal crackdown against the people. This scenario had unfolded in the aftermath of the presidential elections in December 2010 and during all following elections. However, the current level of brutality and the scale of the abuse are unprecedented even for Belarus.

The Human Rights Center “Viasna”, in partnership with OMCT, promptly organized the collection of information about the victims of torture and ill-treatment, and from 12 to 20 August received testimonies from more than 450 victims corroborated with photographs and videos. More than hundred victims were already interviewed on video.

An initial analysis of the testimonies has reliably revealed the systematic nature of torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment across Belarus, which might amount to crimes against humanity.

Among the victims who applied to “Viasna”, there are no people suspected or accused of any violent acts; none of those who contacted “Viasna” resisted arrest or committed any other actions that could constitute lawful grounds for the use of physical force, riot gear and weapons against them in accordance with the Law “On the Bodies of Internal Affairs” of the Republic of Belarus.

Most of the victims who applied to “Viasna” received bodily injuries – fractures, bruises of various sizes, some of them covering the entire surface of the thighs, bruises on the torso, as well as mental trauma from beatings in the premises or on the territory of internal affairs departments, in detention facilities, and in other facilities used to hold detainees, and which were administered with the aim of obtaining a renunciation of their political convictions and forcing them to stop participating in peaceful assemblies. Some of those interviewed testified about being beaten with the above purposes during detention or during transportation in the vehicles of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Many of the victims claim that the officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs who tortured them or others in their presence inflicted multiple blows on the lower part of the back in order to induce involuntary urination and defecation. When inflicting these blows, the detainees were forced to take a certain, usually humiliating position, shout slogans, read prayers, and sing the national anthem. The transportation of the detainees was accompanied by ill-treatment and beatings; often the detainees were stacked one on top of the other.

Some detainees were forced to maintain a motionless, uncomfortable position for several hours, after which the limbs became completely numb; the hands of the detainees were tied with self-locking plastic zip ties, causing particular suffering.

The detained women claim that the behaviour towards them was extremely sexist and humiliating. There are witness reports of rape by officers of the Ministry of Internal Affairs using rubber truncheons, targeting both men and women. There are also testimonies by two people of attempts of such rape against them, as well as multiple evidence of threats of such rape.

There is also evidence of extremely homophobic behaviour by Interior Ministry officers.

Separately, we note the numerous denials of medical assistance by the medical staff of the detention facilities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and numerous cases of refusal to call medical assistance to the detention centres, as well as the extremely harsh conditions of detention. In particular, the prisoners were deprived of food, sleep and water for several days. The number of inmates in the cells of the two detention centres in Minsk was so high that they could only stand, or some of them could only stand while the rest could squat tightly pressed against each other.

No measures (social distancing, face masks etc.) were taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. In this regard, at least 6 people have already reported being positively tested for COVID-19, after their release from detention.

None of the law enforcement officers, who were present but did not personally commit acts of torture, intervened to stop their colleagues.

Despite numerous and consistent reports about the commission of crimes by employees of the internal affairs bodies, the Investigative Committee has not opened a single criminal case, and, accordingly, has not detained or suspended any of the persons who were directly involved in the organization and commission of the crimes against participants in peaceful assemblies and passers-by. Moreover, around 300 officers who were deployed as part of the crackdown, were awarded with medals and honours for excellent service. Widespread impunity leads to further acts of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officers. Meanwhile, the authorities received several hundred

complaints by the victims. The complaint procedure is complicated by interruptions in the receipt of documents (Investigative Committee branches often close during working hours, did not work for two days), respectively, many applicants had difficulties in obtaining a referral for a forensic expert examination of their injuries. Many applicants report threats from investigators who promised to initiate criminal prosecution for participation in the protests. Thus, over time, important evidence of the crimes committed may be lost.

Of particular concern is the position of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. A recent interview with the Minister of Internal Affairs suggests that he is not able to fully control the special units of internal affairs and ensure their lawful behaviour. Moreover, according to reports by officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, including former personnel, there were direct instructions to use brutality in dispersing the protests.

The judges, who conducted administrative proceedings against the beaten, dirty, and often humiliated, detainees in the detention facilities, did not react to their dire condition, visible injuries or testimonies of ill-treatment.

None of the highest officials of Belarus has yet officially expressed their condemnation and regret for the torture and ill-treatment of civilians. On the contrary, the state media have launched a campaign to justify torture and brutality as a response to the protests and reported injuries to Interior Ministry officers. Considering the above, FIDH, Viasna, OMCT and BHC request your urgent intervention in the described situation in Belarus, and kindly request to:

- (a) To issue a statement condemning the widespread and systematic torture and inhuman or degrading treatment of detainees in Belarus and calling for an immediate end to abuses;
- (b) To call on the government of Belarus to immediately and effectively investigate all alleged acts of torture or ill treatment and prosecute the perpetrators;
- (c) To conduct a country visit to Belarus; and
- (d) To urge the Human Rights Council to convene a Special Session - or an Urgent Debate at its 45th session, on the human rights situation in Belarus, with a view to establishing the facts and circumstances of serious human rights violations committed in the lead-up, during and after the August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus.

Yours sincerely,

Gerald Staberock
Secretary General
OMCT



Juliane Falloux
Deputy CEO
FIDH

