

2023. Despite the announcement on 24 September by the interim government that they would drop these charges, by the end of the year the majority of cases had not been formally dropped.

On 11 September the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association promised to abolish a database of workers. They had previously denied that the database was being used to “blacklist” and prevent the employment of workers associated with trade unions or protests.

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1. “Bangladesh: Repackaging repression: The cyber security act and the continuing lawfare against dissent in Bangladesh”, 8 August 1
 2. “Bangladesh: Further video and photographic analysis confirm police unlawfully used lethal and less-lethal weapons against protesters”, 25 July 1
 3. “Bangladesh: Over 100 Indigenous People Arbitrarily Arrested: Bawm Villagers”, 22 May 1

BELARUS

Republic of Belarus

The authorities continued to crack down on all forms of public criticism and abused the justice system to penalize peaceful dissent. The suppression of independent media and civil society organizations escalated. Torture and other ill-treatment were endemic and impunity prevailed. The enforced disappearance of prisoners was widely practised. The LGBTI community continued to face harassment. Refugees and migrants were forced across borders with the EU. Climate action policies remained inadequate.

BACKGROUND

With international isolation prevailing, Belarus continued to engage with Russia economically, politically, diplomatically and militarily. Rhetoric about external threats from EU neighbours and Ukraine continued, and Belarus’s military forces conducted activities

intended to be perceived as preparation for a military confrontation.

In October the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus stated that the country’s engagement with the UN human rights system had “reached its lowest historical point”.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, ASSOCIATION AND ASSEMBLY

Freedom of expression remained severely curtailed. The official list of online, printed and broadcast materials labelled by the authorities as containing “extremist content” continued to grow. Each month, hundreds of individuals were arbitrarily added to the “List of persons involved in extremist activities”, which comprised 4,707 people as of December.

At the end of the year, 45 media workers were in prison for their professional activity.

The suppression of civil society organizations, including independent NGOs, trade unions and ethnic and religious communities, escalated. At least 329 organizations were dissolved or in the process of dissolution in 2024.

Human rights defender and 2020 protest icon, 73-year-old Nina Bahinskaya, was arbitrarily detained in October for marching with a poster of an arbitrarily banned political party. Police held her in custody in handcuffs for three hours, then released her pending a court hearing.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

Religious organizations and clergy not aligned with the government faced accusations of creating or distributing extremist materials, leading to prohibition and blocking of online materials and social network profiles, arbitrary detentions and arrests.

In May, Roman Catholic priest Andrei Yukhnevich was detained for displaying a Ukrainian flag on his social media account. He was then accused of sexually abusing minors and remanded in custody.

ARBITRARY ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS

The authorities released dozens of prisoners convicted of politically-motivated charges,

under non-disclosure conditions and after forcing them to appeal for pardon. Their names were not released.

However, arrests and prosecution of dissenters remained widespread, particularly targeting participants and supporters of the peaceful mass protests in 2020, whose family members were also harassed. In January, police raided the homes of about 160 individuals, mainly relatives of unfairly imprisoned protesters. Some were briefly detained and questioned.

As of December, 1,265 people were imprisoned on politically motivated charges and around 3,000 were released after fully serving their sentence, according to the Human Rights Centre Viasna. Also, according to Viasna, at least 55 people were detained in 2024 upon returning to Belarus from exile. Some were penalized under administrative proceedings, and 17 faced criminal charges, including for making donations to victims of human rights violations.

TORTURE AND OTHER ILL-TREATMENT

Torture and other ill-treatment remained endemic, with perpetrators enjoying impunity. Individuals convicted on politically motivated charges endured harsher treatment in custody, their prison uniforms marked with yellow badges. Several such high-profile prisoners were denied contact with the outside world, frequently put in punishment cells for extended periods and refused adequate healthcare.

Five victims of politically motivated prosecution died in detention. Two of them, Vadzim Khrasko and Igor Lednik, had pre-existing health conditions that were well known to the authorities.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

Throughout the year, there was no outside contact with and no direct information about Syarhei Tsikhanouski, Ihar Losik, Maksim Znak, Mikalai Statkevich, Viktor Babaryka and other imprisoned high-profile activists, journalists and politicians. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on Belarus, such prolonged periods of isolation could amount to enforced disappearances.

There had been no contact with the imprisoned 2020 protest leader Maryia Kalesnikava for over 600 days, until her father was granted a meeting with her in November following international pressure.

UNFAIR TRIALS

The authorities continued to abuse the justice system to suppress peaceful dissent, targeting political opponents, human rights defenders, activists, and lawyers, among others. Trials in absentia were commonplace. In July, 20 exiled political analysts and journalists affiliated with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya were sentenced to between 10 and 11-and-a-half years' imprisonment for crimes against the state and "extremism".

LGBTI PEOPLE'S RIGHTS

In February the Prosecutor General presented a draft law to parliament proposing to make "propaganda of non-traditional family relations", including "propaganda of abnormal relationships, pedophilia, and voluntary refusal to have children", administrative offences.

In April the Ministry of Culture updated the official definition of pornography by adding "non-traditional sexual relations and/or sexual behaviour", clarifying that it included, among other things, consensual same-sex and bisexual relationships.

The LGBTI community continued to face harassment, including arbitrary arrests. NGOs and media reported that, in August and September alone, at least 30 LGBTI people were detained. Their detentions were mostly for purported "minor hooliganism" and subscription to "extremist" materials, but also for "production and distribution of pornographic materials" (a criminal offence if committed repeatedly).

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Human rights organizations ZMINA, Freedom House, BYPOL and Viasna reported 2,219 cases of the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children to Belarus, where they were enrolled into local education facilities and subjected to indoctrination and propaganda.

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Authorities continued to force refugees and migrants across Belarus's borders with the EU. According to the NGO Human Constanta, in the three years to March 2024, at least 116 migrants and refugees were reported to have died in the border areas between Belarus and the EU, as a result of adverse conditions and alleged violent forcible returns.

DEATH PENALTY

No new executions were recorded. A German national, Rico Krieger, was convicted of several offences, including spying and mercenary activities, and sentenced to death in July. He was later pardoned and then freed on 1 August as part of a prisoner exchange agreed between Russia and several western countries.

RIGHT TO A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT

The Climate Change Performance Index lowered Belarus's ranking to 47th place ("among the overall low performers"), scoring it "very low in the Renewable Energy and Climate Policy categories".

BELGIUM

Kingdom of Belgium

New criminal offences risked undermining the right to freedom of expression. Arms transfers to Israel were halted but repression against pro-Palestinian protesters was on the rise. Asylum seekers were left homeless and Afghan asylum seekers were denied protection. Prison conditions remained dire although some progress was made in establishing oversight. Provisions for care for survivors of sexual violence were strengthened and the country's policies on people with disabilities were reviewed internationally. The state was ordered to pay reparations for crimes against humanity during colonial rule.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In February, parliament adopted a new criminal code. It criminalized some acts, including a malicious attack on the authority of the state, glorification of terrorism and lese-majesty (an offence of showing a lack of respect for the sovereign), which would undermine freedom of expression.

FREEDOM OF PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Municipalities continued to require prior authorization for public gatherings, a disproportionate restriction of the right to protest.¹ In May, police used a water cannon and tear gas to disperse a peaceful demonstration near the Israeli embassy protesting against human rights violations in Gaza. The mayor of Uccle district had ordered the protest to be broken up as the organizers had not obtained prior authorization.

In September, civil society organizations warned against increasing repression against pro-Palestinian demonstrators, highlighting the use of administrative sanctions against peaceful protesters for failing to comply with unlawful municipal authorization regimes. Around 70 people who had participated in or sympathized with the occupation of a university building in the capital, Brussels were summoned for questioning in a criminal investigation into membership of a group "inciting segregation and racism".²

REFUGEES' AND MIGRANTS' RIGHTS

Authorities continued to leave thousands of asylum seekers homeless and destitute by denying them access to accommodation.

Despite the severity of the human rights crisis in Afghanistan, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons continued to deny international protection to the majority of Afghan asylum seekers. Statistics published in December indicated that only 39% of those applying were granted protection. Most of the Afghan nationals who did not obtain international protection were unable to return to Afghanistan and were vulnerable to abuse due to their irregular migration status.