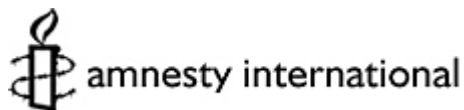


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Belarus urged to stop clampdown on opposition

Amnesty International has condemned the violent dispersal of a mainly peaceful demonstration in the aftermath of Sunday's presidential election in Belarus which was marred by irregularities.

In what appears to be a clampdown on opposition activities, seven of the nine opposition presidential candidates have been detained along with as many as 500 peaceful demonstrators, opposition activists, human rights defenders and journalists, many of whom were beaten by riot police.

Earlier today the Belarusian Minister of Internal Affairs, Anatoly Kuleshov, said that the activists were charged with organizing an unsanctioned meeting and could face up to 15 years' imprisonment. According a local non-governmental organization, 14 people, including five former presidential candidates, have been charged with this offence.

"The events of the last 24 hours obliterate the fragile signs of openness in the run-up to the presidential election," said Heather McGill, Amnesty International's expert on Belarus.

"The Belarusian authorities must investigate all allegations of disproportionate use of force by riot police. They must also look very carefully into how the violence started. Those arrested for their peaceful participation in the protest must be immediately released. If they are sentenced to imprisonment, they will be considered prisoners of conscience."

It was announced today that the incumbent President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was re-elected for the fourth time.

More than 20,000 people gathered in the centre of the capital Minsk to protest the election rigging and to show support for opposition candidates.

They made their way towards the parliament building unhindered by police and held a peaceful meeting. At approximately 10pm a small group of young men standing by the doors to the parliament building armed with batons, their faces covered with scarves started to call on the demonstrators to storm the building. They broke down the doors and broke windows after which riot police sought to disperse the entire demonstration.

Eye witnesses stated that opposition leaders called on the demonstrators to remain peaceful. They also reported that the police beat demonstrators and journalists with batons.

The journalist Iryna Khalip was driving to hospital with her husband, the presidential candidate Andrei Sannikov, who had been wounded by riot police, when they were stopped and she and her husband were dragged from the car and detained. She was able to tell a Russian Radio station that police were beating her on the face before her phone was cut off.

A group of protesters accompanied by journalists, including a New York Times correspondent, and led by presidential candidate Vladimir Neklyayev were blocked by a traffic patrol car on their way to join the demonstration at 7pm. After attempting to push the car out of the way many of them were beaten. Vladimir Neklyayev received head injuries and went to a hospital for treatment, but was later forcibly removed from the hospital by police officers and detained.

Opposition party headquarters, human rights activists and news agencies were raided throughout the night and civil society activists were detained.

Harassment against opposition supporters started even before the presidential election. On 18 and 19 December some of them were either detained or blocked in their apartments by police officers.

"The recent clampdown is yet another attempt to silence the opposition and a demonstration of the blatant disregard for human rights by the Belarusian authorities," said Heather McGill.

"The force with which the peaceful protests were dealt with demonstrate the degree to which the authorities in Belarus disregard the rights to freedom of speech and to peaceful protest, and the lengths to which they will go to hold on to power" Heather McGill said.

Amnesty International has frequently documented violations of the right to assembly in Belarus where restrictive laws ban all events within 200 metres of public buildings, metro stations or pedestrian crossings.

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