



UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS FINDS CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY MAY HAVE BEEN COMMITTED IN BELARUS

In his [report](#) to the UN Human Rights Council released today, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has found there are sufficient grounds to believe systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been and are being committed in Belarus, which may constitute crimes against humanity.

However, the report also concludes that there is no reasonable expectation for justice to be delivered for human rights violations committed in Belarus given “an active policy to shield perpetrators and prevent accountability,” recommending that member states “work towards accountability through national proceedings based on accepted principles of extraterritorial and universal jurisdiction.”

The International Accountability Platform for Belarus (IAPB) supports this recommendation and calls on states to consider exercising universal or extraterritorial jurisdiction to hold alleged perpetrators accountable and deliver justice to victims, in accordance with states’ obligations to investigate and prosecute international crimes under international law.

The report from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights draws from interviews with 207 witnesses and witnesses and an analysis of over 2,500 documents. It finds Belarusian state authorities responsible for widespread and systematic human rights violations between 1 May 2020 and 31 December 2022, such as unlawful deprivation of life, torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence, violations of the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, and the denial of due process and the right to enter one’s own country.

According to the High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk:

“Our report paints an unacceptable picture of impunity and the near-total destruction of civic space and fundamental freedoms in Belarus. The Government owes it to its people to bring a halt to this mass repression and to conduct impartial and transparent investigations to ensure that those responsible for grave violations are held accountable.”

Reacting to the report, Pavel Sapelko, representative and lawyer from Viasna, IAPB’s co-lead organization, said:

“The courage of the victims of torture and the efforts of human rights defenders to prevent impunity will bring the perpetrators of all known cases of torture and ill-treatment and other inhumane acts to justice. We applaud the efforts of international organizations and hope for the expansion of the fight against impunity in national jurisdictions. We will not stop in our quest for justice.”

Victoria Federova, from the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus, also IAPB’s co-lead organization, stated:

“We welcome the report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and fully support its conclusions regarding the possible qualification of human rights violations in Belarus as crimes against humanity. It will enable us to advance the application of the principle of universal jurisdiction to

prosecute perpetrators in other states. I would like to note the important contribution of the International Accountability Platform for Belarus and Belarusian human rights organisations to this report. This is the result of our documentation and preservation of evidence of human rights violations in Belarus.”

The IAPB provided substantial support to the Office of the High Commissioner examination of the situation in Belarus (OEB), including by facilitating interviews with over 100 victims and witnesses and providing access to over 1,300 documents on a range of violations the OEB found to have been committed by state actors.

The report also documented over 100 cases of sexual and gender-based violence against detainees, finding another 180 documented and analysed by civil society organisations to be credible. However, the High Commissioner noted the scale of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is likely to be under-reported due to stigma, fear of reprisals and denial of access of UN human rights investigators to the country. It also highlighted the particular violations suffered by LGBTIQ+ victims.

The IAPB supported the OEB’s findings on SGBV, and is currently pursuing a gender strategy with a view to ensuring any criminal investigations and prosecutions of international crimes committed in Belarus are conducted in a gender-competent manner and take into account the full range of harms experienced by men, women and persons with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity.

Kate Vigneswaran, Head of the IAPB, said:

“The onus is now on states to live up to their commitment to accountability by ensuring Belarusians have avenues to access remedies. Progressive legal frameworks providing criminal justice authorities with the opportunity to exercise universal or extraterritorial jurisdiction over crimes committed in Belarus are pointless if they are not used. Belarusians have very few venues they can turn to for justice, and those that do exist should make themselves available.”

The OHCHR’s statement and full report is available [here](#).

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About the IAPB

The IAPB is a coalition of independent non-government organisations that have joined forces to collect, consolidate, verify, and preserve evidence of gross human rights violations constituting crimes under international law allegedly committed by Belarusian authorities and others in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath. It builds on the ongoing efforts of Belarusian human rights organisations to collect information about human rights violations committed in Belarus. More information about the IAPB can be found on iapbelarus.org. The IAPB is led by DIGNITY (Danish Institute Against Torture), the Human Rights Centre “Viasna”, the International Committee for the Investigation of Torture in Belarus and REDRESS.