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ON THE SITUATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN BELARUS

79th session of the General Assembly

Item 71

29 October 2024

New York

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, I am addressing you for the last time as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus. After 6 years in that capacity, I thought appropriate to wrap up my mission with an overview of the engagement – or, rather, lack thereof - of the Belarusian authorities with United Nations human rights bodies and mechanisms, including but not limited to my mandate.

Mr. President,

Since my appointment in 2018 the human rights situation in Belarus has tremendously deteriorated. And so has the level of engagement of Belarus with the UN human rights system, as I evidence in my report.

Following the contested presidential election of 2020, Belarusians have experienced repressions of unprecedented scale and intensity. My previous reports highlighted the systematic ruthlessness of the authorities' response to peaceful protests. Many individuals have been subjected to heinous acts of torture or other ill-treatment, and some even lost their lives. Thousands were convicted without fair trial for the legitimate exercise of their human rights. Some of those still in prison are in a life-threatening condition; many have been held incommunicado for so long that we at Special procedures suspect they are victims of enforced disappearances.

Civil society has been virtually eradicated, after all independent associations critical of the authorities were banned or forced to dissolve. Over the past four years, I have reported to you on how human rights defenders, journalists and other members of civil society in Belarus endure judicial harassment; how women's human rights are systematically violated; how many Belarusian citizens have been compelled to exile due to denial of their civil and political rights and how security laws have been misused in order to track, prosecute, or silence those expressing dissenting views, compelling hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to exile. Separated from their families, deprived of their properties in Belarus, fearing arrest in the country, many Belarusians abroad are also at risk of losing their citizenship.

These massive human rights violations have provoked an outcry among the international community, prompting the Human Rights Council to establish an additional mandate to hold the perpetrators to account. The Belarusian government responded by contesting the legitimacy of both mandates, while also distorting the *raison d'être* of several other UN mechanisms.

Instead of complying with its obligations, the Government denounced the international treaties it deemed inconvenient, such as the Aarhus Convention in 2022. In denouncing the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2023, Belarus deprived its people of access to the individual complaints procedure of the Human Rights Committee, the main mechanism – beyond my mandate – used by victims so far to bring up their grievances to the international level.

Distinguished delegates,

My report also overviews how Belarus, in ignoring the recommendations of several organisations, has increased its self-isolation.

In 2023, for example, the International Labour Organization activated, for the second time in its history, a procedure under article 33 of its Constitution, to address Belarus' persistent failure to implement recommendations made over the past two decades by its Commission of Inquiry, related to the freedom of association of trade unions.

At the regional level, the Moscow mechanism has been invoked twice since 2020 by participating States of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, to examine the human rights situation in Belarus. Last summer, the OSCE's Vienna mechanism was invoked to investigate specifically violations against political prisoners.

The authorities claim that such a sustained attention on Belarus would stem from international fora and laws being misused specifically to undermine the legitimacy of the current Government. Yet Belarus is not a victim of double standards: is has earned its reputation as a major human rights offender.

I am not alone making such an assessment. A few days ago, the Chair of the Committee against Torture presented to you the results of the Committee's confidential inquiry on Belarus. It concluded that torture was systematically practiced in the country, and nothing was done to prevent this. Last year, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded in its own report that some of the violations that occurred since 2020 could amount to crimes against humanity. Recently, a State referred this allegation to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court himself.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Several of the human rights issues I report about are of a systematic nature, and have persisted for years and even decades, despite numerous and consistent recommendations from many international bodies. These are notably: the lack of separation of powers; the absence of fair trial guarantees, whereas death penalty is still applied in Belarus; the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of political opponents, their ill-treatment in detention; the cumulated limitations on freedoms of expression, assembly and association; the deprivation of citizens of their right to take part in public affairs, one election after the other.

And for all these violations it appears that perpetrators enjoy total impunity. This should stop.

These chronical human rights issues would not raise our concerns, had the Belarusian authorities followed the recommendations made by competent international bodies,

starting with the Universal Periodic Review. In fact, many recommendations that the Government ignores date back to the 1990s. My own reports reiterate concerns already voiced by my predecessor, Mr. Miklós HARASZTI, and some appeared even earlier, almost two decades ago, in the reports of Mr. Adrian SEVERIN, the holder of the mandate on Belarus established by the former Commission on Human Rights.

The situation of human rights in Belarus is now worse than ever, and deserves continuous scrutiny. I therefore welcome the renewal of my mandate and hereby wish my successor, Mr. Nils MUIZNIEKS, all the best in this position. Monitoring the situation of human rights in Belarus is not an easy task – but neither is maintaining it high on the international agenda, unfortunately.

Excellencies

My mission has been extremely challenging, yet rewarding. I am grateful that it gave me the opportunity to meet so many wonderful and courageous people – starting with Belarusian human rights defenders of course, whom I thank wholeheartedly for their inspirational support in discharging my mandate.

I deeply regret that, in spite of all my efforts, impunity for grave human rights violations persists in Belarus, even if some political prisoners have been released earlier, on humanitarian grounds. None has obtained redress however, and perpetrators have not been held accountable for their crimes, while hundreds of victims of human rights violations are in jail, and new ones are convicted on a daily basis.

I haven't lost hope that this might change however. But in the absence of an independent justice system in Belarus, it is mostly up to you, member states of the United Nations, to uphold human rights in Belarus, and contribute to ending impunity for past violations. Do not fail Belarusians please.

Thank you for your attention.