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Lukashenko Opponent Flees Belarus Secret Police

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Mikhalevich

MINSK — A former Belarussian presidential candidate says he has fled the country to escape its secret police, as Human Rights Watch strongly condemned Belarus' post-election crackdown.

Ales Mikhalevich said he was in a safe location abroad, after previously saying he was beaten, stripped naked and hung by his hands during two months' confinement at the hands of the police, which still go under their Soviet name, the KGB.

Mikhalevich detailed his situation in a blog Monday as Human Rights Watch released a 31-page report documenting persecution of opposition candidates and activists, abuse of detainees, trials behind closed doors, raids on rights groups and pressure on families and lawyers.

"The government has created a serious human rights crisis in Belarus, and the UN Human Rights Council should not remain silent about it," Anna Sevortyan, director of Human Rights

Watch's office in Russia, said in a statement. "A council resolution would send a strong message to the Belarus authorities that the ongoing crackdown must end."

More than 700 people, including seven presidential candidates, were arrested after massive protests against fraud in the Dec. 19 vote in which President Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected. International observers said the vote was rigged.

More than 30 of those detained, including presidential candidates Andrei Sannikov and Nikolai Statkevich, have remained in custody.

Human Rights Watch said most of those accused of involvement in the election-day protest had no defense counsel and were not allowed to call witnesses.

It said detainees served their sentences in overcrowded cells, where they were forced to sleep on the floor, share beds or take turns sleeping. Many said their cells were freezing and lacked toilets, that there was no easy access to medical treatment, and that there were no hygiene items for women.

Mikhalevich told reporters last month after his release from prison that he had sent a letter to the United Nations Committee Against Torture describing his treatment by the KGB. He said that following his torture he was forced to sign a paper in which he pledged to cooperate with the secret police.

He said in his blog he had decided to flee after receiving summons from the KGB. "I had reason to believe I would never leave the KGB building again," he said.

The KGB, which has rejected Mikhalevich's claim of torture, wouldn't comment Monday.

Human Rights Watch said that during the crackdown the police and security forces had also searched the premises of four independent media outlets and the homes of 12 journalists, confiscating their equipment and revoking the license of a radio station.

The European Union responded to the flawed election and repression against the opposition in Belarus by imposing travel restrictions and an asset freeze for 156 top Belarussian officials. The United States also extended its list of Belarussian officials subject to a visa ban and said it was working to impose additional financial sanctions.

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