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'Torture Chamber': Jailed Belarusians Reveal Prison Abuse

By Valery Kalinovsky for AFP

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People detained during recent rallies of opposition supporters, who accuse strongman Alexander Lukashenko of falsifying the polls in the presidential election, leave the Okrestina prison early morning in Minsk on Aug. 14. **Sergei Gapon / AFP**

Graphic content

Emerging from a jail in Minsk with other Belarusians detained in a post-election crackdown, 27-year-old math teacher Yana Bobrovskaya said she never expected to make it out alive.

"We thought we would be buried in here," she said Friday, weeping as she recounted her experience to AFP.

"They can do anything while you have no rights," she added.

Bobrovskaya was one of hundreds of Belarusian protesters and chance bystanders who were being released after they were detained in a crackdown following President Alexander

Lukashenko's disputed landslide win on Sunday.

Hundreds of anguished friends and relatives were waiting outside the Minsk detention center, and several ambulances arrived to take injured people away.

Many detainees gave harrowing accounts of beatings, humiliation and torture.

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Some women were threatened with rape, while men spoke of being ordered to strip naked and get down on all fours while officers beat them with truncheons, according to Amnesty International.

One man told AFP he was burned with cigarettes, while another said he was given electric shocks and beaten with sticks.

Many seemed unafraid to speak out and some men undressed to show AFP journalists their bruised buttocks and stomachs.

Bobrovskaya said she was detained even though she did not take part in protests and spent three days without food with some 50 women crowded into a cell designed for four.

When they asked for tampons and toilet paper, they were told to wipe themselves with their clothes, she said.

"It's hard to imagine such things in the 21st century," she said, describing Belarus as a "peaceful country."

She said her cellmates were well-educated professionals like her.

"We started joking: 'If you haven't been to jail, you're not a Belarusian."

'We do whatever we want'

Olesya Stogova, a Russian citizen in her 30s, said she received equally inhumane treatment.

She was visiting Belarus from her home city of St. Petersburg and was snatched off the streets in the crackdown.

Stogova said she was kicked and beaten with truncheons and there were almost 40 women in her four-person cell.

When she said she was Russian, guards unleashed an expletive-laden tirade.

"We'll do whatever we want. We'll leave you disfigured — you won't recognize yourself," she said guards told her.

"There was only tap water and nothing else. We were packed like sardines in a tin, all sweating," she told AFP.

"It was a torture chamber," she said.

Male detainees were treated even worse, she said.

Ales Pushkin, a prominent Belarusian performance artist, said he was detained after a protest and beaten until he "turned blue."

"All these days I've been brutalized," the 55-year-old told AFP.

Protester Andrei Yanushka said he had been beaten on the head and body.

Speaking just before an ambulance arrived to take him away, the 35-year-old said Lukashenko should no longer remain at the helm.

"He cannot be president of Belarus," he said.

'Gulag experience'

While many detained protesters are being released under pressure from a growing wave of demonstrations, high-profile Lukashenko critics are still being held in jail.

Vitali Shkliarov, a Washington-based political analyst and strategist who has worked on U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign, was detained while on a visit to his native Belarus.

The 44-year-old, who is a visiting scholar at Harvard University, has been accused of helping plot mass unrest, a charge he denies.

He is being held in a jail in central Minsk where he is experiencing humiliations and pressure, his lawyer Anton Gashinsky said.

Several days ago Shkliarov was strip-searched and put in a standing cell where he spent five or six hours without food or water, the lawyer said.

He also had to sleep with the lights on and listen to Soviet-era propaganda songs.

"He calls this torture," Gashinsky told AFP, adding that his client said his experiences were similar to the Gulag camp memoirs of Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

"He is trying to hang on in there," the lawyer said.

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