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Justice Is Needed for Belarus. International Scrutiny Is the Way to Get it.

I have seen women and men tortured, humiliated and degraded by the Lukashenko regime.

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Images of protesters injured in Belarus **HRW**

It is unusual for Belarus to feature in international news headlines, but it's now been doing so for six weeks. Massive, popular and overwhelmingly peaceful protests have swept the country since the Aug. 9 contested re-election of the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994.

The authorities' initial response to the protests was massive, blunt force. In Belarus, police brutality and ruthless repression is nothing new, but the scale seen since Aug. 9 is truly unprecedented.

In an attempt to stifle the protests, Belarusian security forces arbitrarily detained close to 7,000 people, protesters and bystanders alike, over four days, and systematically tortured and otherwise ill-treated hundreds of them. But the horrific police abuse backfired, and only triggered the unprecedented lasting wave of public outrage.

A few weeks ago, my colleague and I traveled to Belarus and interviewed 27 former detainees, including six women, in Minsk, Hrodna and Homiel. We also spoke to witnesses and medics, examined medical documents and photographs of injuries and went through dozens of written accounts available in the public domain or provided to us directly by victims.

They detailed the beatings, prolonged stress positions, electric shocks and threats of murder and rape to which they'd been subjected. Those who suffered only beatings and horrendous detention conditions tended to describe their ordeal as "the light version." Others, they said, "were less lucky." They had serious injuries, including broken bones, cracked teeth, skin wounds, electrical burns, concussions or kidney damage. Six people we interviewed had to be hospitalized for one to five days. Four of them had fractures. One was raped with a truncheon in a police van.

The women who spoke to us, who all had been detained in Minsk, said they were threatened, humiliated, pushed, shoved, and in some cases also beaten, albeit less severely than the men.

They encountered other indignities — like being denied sanitary napkins while crammed in tiny, suffocating cells for days with dozens of other female detainees and being sexually harassed by police officers.

Diana, a 24-year-old web designer, arrested on Aug. 11 with four female friends, had to kneel on the floor of a police van with her hands tied behind her back her so tightly that her wrists bled while the riot police yelled, "We'll make sure you get 10 to 15 years in prison. You'll be gang-raped there, and you'll come out old and decrepit with useless vaginas."

Alia, a 22-year-old IT specialist rounded up on Aug. 9, said that at the police precinct where she was kept overnight, she and other female detainees stood for hours as the men were forced to lie flat on the floor, face down, then do push-ups, and got vicious beatings.

Meanwhile, some of the officers made sexual advances toward the women: "[They] were trying to get our phone numbers. 'Oh, you'll be free and then we can go out for a coffee. I have a car and a flat.' And so we started negotiating with them, like, 'If I give you my number, will you let me go to the toilet?'"

At the Okrestina detention facility in Minsk, several dozen women shared one cell and could barely move or breathe. Many of them felt faint from the lack of air. Two started vomiting. The women repeatedly called on the guards to split them into different cells because they could not bear it anymore. The guards' eventual response was to open the door and pour a bucket of cold water over the women, leaving them in dripping wet clothes and with a wet floor.

After their release, dozens of people lodged complaints with the authorities about cruel and degrading treatment by police. Their supporters, friends and family members are now in the streets, demanding justice. They're from various strata of Belarusian society. Some had never

been involved in civic affairs or protests before but couldn't remain silent in the face of such brutal abuses.

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On Aug. 26, the prosecutor's office announced the creation of an inter-agency commission to look into recent police conduct, both on the streets when they were arresting people and in detention facilities. However, the authorities have yet to open a single criminal case. Meanwhile, after a three-week lull in detentions, the police again began to arrest protesters in large numbers. The Interior Ministry reported the detention of 774 protesters on Sunday, Sept. 13, alone.

Lukashenko is no doubt counting on the headlines to fade, for international attention to yield to fatigue. This is exactly why international scrutiny and pressure for accountability for torture is so urgently needed. There are ways to get this done.

On Friday, the UN Human Rights Council will hold an urgent debate on Belarus. It should adopt a resolution that calls for robust monitoring and reporting, with a view toward ensuring accountability. And the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should open an independent inquiry to investigate the abuse and make recommendations to ensure justice and provide redress.

With all eyes on Belarus, the authorities might be less inclined to feel they can get away with the widespread brutality of those early days.

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