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OSCE Condemns Belarus Torture, Calls for Fresh Presidential Vote

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Riot police officers detain a man during a march of opposition supporters from central Minsk to a site of Stalin-era executions just outside the capital on November 1, 2020. **Stringer / AFP**

A report from the OSCE election-monitoring organization published on Thursday condemned "massive" rights abuses and torture in Belarus and called for a re-run of the country's August presidential polls in which President Alexander Lukashenko claimed victory.

The first major independent report into the election and subsequent crackdown by authorities said human rights abuses "were found to be massive and systematic and proven beyond doubt" and also recommended that the result of the vote should be annulled "due to irregularities at all stages of the process."

Lukashenko claimed victory after the election in August, but tens of thousands of opposition protesters have taken to the streets in a wave of protests in the months since decrying fraud.

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The 66-year-old authoritarian leader -- emboldened by Russia's backing -- has refused to step down despite the mass gatherings demanding he resign and hand power to main opposition candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya who has taken refuge in neighboring Lithuania.

The report by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) urged Belarus to "organise new genuine presidential elections based on international standards."

It says that "with regard to the question of 'election fraud' the rapporteur comes to the conclusion that there were evident shortcomings of the presidential elections," going on to say the vote was "not transparent, free or fair."

'Lawlessness and brutality'

The report was produced at the request of 17 states including France, the UK and the U.S. and is based on 700 submissions of evidence.

It was discussed at a meeting of the OSCE's permanent council on Thursday.

The rapporteur who produced the report was however not able to travel to Belarus as Minsk refused to co-operate with the probe.

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the report's finding were "a damning indictment of Lukashenko's regime" and said the UK supported its call for fresh elections.

U.S. Ambassador to the OSCE James Gilmore said in a statement that it was "shocking that the Belarusian security services would treat their fellow citizens in such an unacceptable manner, and even more shocking that such lawlessness and brutality is occurring with total impunity."

The report says that "some 1,500 persons were arrested before the election and more than 10,000 after the election in the repression against peaceful protests" with the total figure now at around 13,000.

Among the cases of abuse cited is one of a couple who went to a police station to search for their son and were then themselves detained, beaten and forced to undress.

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The report says women have been "tortured by way of beating and threats of sexual violence."

Also on Thursday, Tikhanovskaya visited Vienna where she was received by Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

She said in a statement that the two discussed "peaceful ways of resolving the political and economic crisis", as well as "Austria's possible role in this process."

Belarus also faced harsh criticism at the UN on Monday, with diplomats condemning arbitrary detentions and torture allegations.

During a review of Belarus's rights record at the United Nations in Geneva, many diplomats urged Belarus authorities to halt the crackdown on demonstrators.

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