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IOC to Probe Belarus Officials Over Athlete's Forced Flight

By AFP

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Krystsina Tsimanouskaya, who claimed her team tried to force her to leave Japan following a row during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, walks with her luggage inside the Polish embassy in Tokyo. **Yuki Iwamura / AFP**

Olympic officials said Tuesday they will investigate Belarus over claims the team tried to force an athlete now sheltering in Poland's Tokyo embassy to return home after she criticized her coaches.

Krystsina Tsimanouskaya says she fears for her safety if she returns to Belarus, and she is expected to travel to Poland this week after being offered a humanitarian visa.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday accused Belarus of an "act of transnational repression" over the alleged attempt to force her home.

Tsimanouskaya spent the night in Poland's embassy in Tokyo after arriving there Monday

evening. Warsaw has denounced what it calls a "criminal attempt" to kidnap the athlete.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said he had spoken to the "courageous" Tsimanouskaya, who is "currently well taken care of and safe."

"I assured her that she can count on the support and solidarity of Poland. In the coming days, she will fly to Warsaw, where she will be able to thrive without obstacles and, if she so chooses, will receive further assistance," he wrote on Facebook.

Tsimanouskaya's husband Arseny Zdanevich told AFP he had fled Belarus and was hoping to join his wife "in the near future."

"I believe it would not be safe for me to be there," the 25-year-old fitness trainer said by phone from Ukraine.

Tsimanouskaya, a 200 meters specialist, criticized the Belarusian athletics federation after they tried to force her to run in a relay. She said that outburst led to the attempt to forcibly send her home.

Belarus strongman Alexander Lukashenko has cracked down on any form of dissent since mass protests erupted after elections last year that were deemed unfair by the West.

Tsimanouskaya was one of more than 2,000 Belarusian sports figures who signed an open letter calling for new elections and for political prisoners to be freed.

Poland is a staunch critic of Lukashenko's regime and has become home to a growing number of dissidents.

Morawiecki said offering the athlete help was an important gesture "to get the word out on the international arena as to what is happening across our eastern border," telling Belarusians "we won't leave you stranded!"

Activist group Global Athlete called overnight for the IOC to immediately suspend Belarus's Olympic committee and allow the country's athletes to compete as neutral athletes.

The NGO said Tsimanouskaya's "alleged kidnapping... is yet another example of the alarming athlete abuse occurring in Belarus."

IOC spokesman Mark Adams said the body was launching a formal investigation and also expected to receive a report from Belarus's Olympic committee today.

"We're going to need to establish facts," he told reporters in Tokyo, adding that the IOC would "need to hear everyone involved."

Asked about the safety of the team's remaining athletes at the Games, Adams said IOC and Tokyo 2020 staff were based at the Olympic Village and could be approached if necessary.

The US secretary of state accused Lukashenko's regime of trying "to commit another act of transnational repression: attempting to force Olympian Krystsina Tsimanouskaya to leave simply for exercising free speech."

"Such actions violate the Olympic spirit, are an affront to basic rights, and cannot be tolerated," he tweeted.

Related article: Missing Belarus Activist Found Hanged in Ukraine

Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, sparked international outrage in May by dispatching a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair plane flying from Greece to Lithuania in order to arrest a dissident onboard.

Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Pawel Jablonski seemed to reference that incident when he declined to confirm whether Tsimanouskaya would fly out on Wednesday as has been rumored, saying it was a safety matter.

"As we know, Alexander Lukashenko's regime has been known to resort to different methods, often straight-up illegal ones," he told Polsat News.

The Olympic saga came as police in Ukraine said a missing Belarusian activist, whose NGO helps his compatriots flee the country, had been found hanged in a park in Kiev.

Police said they had opened a murder probe and would pursue all leads including a possible "murder disguised as a suicide," as activists said the man had been the victim of a "planned operation" by the Belarus regime.

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