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Belarus Olympic Athlete Stops Over in Vienna Before Poland Refuge

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Krystsina Tsimanouskaya said she feared for her life if she was forced to return home after criticizing her coaches. **Charly Triballeau / AFP**

Belarusian Olympic athlete Krystsina Tsimanouskaya arrived in Austria on Wednesday en route to Poland, where she is expected to take refuge after saying she feared for her life if forced to return home.

The 24-year-old sprinter has been at the center of a diplomatic drama in the middle of the Games since seeking protection from Tokyo 2020 staff on Sunday, saying her team was trying to bundle her onto a plane after she publicly criticized her coaches.

Related article: Missing Belarus Dissident Found Hanged in Ukraine Park

In an unexpected twist on Wednesday the athlete made a last-minute switch and decided not

to board her flight to Warsaw, which has offered her a humanitarian visa, instead taking a plane to the Austrian capital.

The Austrian Airlines flight arrived at Vienna airport shortly after 3:00 p.m. (13:00 GMT) on Wednesday.

A VIP van followed by two police vehicles were waiting to escort Tsimanouskaya from the plane.

"According to our information, she is scheduled to head to Warsaw this evening," an Austrian foreign ministry spokesman told AFP, although the ministry added that should she "want to make an asylum application in Austria, she can of course count on our support."

Tsimanouskaya had entered the airport in Tokyo surrounded by a phalanx of security, wearing a yellow facemask and with the pink ends of her hair visible in a bun.

She declined to speak to media gathered at her gate, but waved as she rounded the corner towards her plane.

Before traveling she had been sheltering in the Polish embassy in Tokyo for the past two nights after calling for international help, and activists have said she will go to Warsaw.

Belarus has been wracked by political upheaval and a crackdown on dissent after disputed elections that returned strongman Alexander Lukashenko to power last year.

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.

But her trouble in Tokyo came after she posted on her Instagram, criticizing her coaches for entering her into a race without informing her first.

Her husband has fled to Ukraine and on Wednesday the Polish government said he had also been given a humanitarian visa.

The pair are expected to meet up in Poland, a staunch critic of Lukashenko's regime and home to a growing number of dissidents.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said Tuesday 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," he wrote on Facebook.

Dissident found hanged

The International Olympic Committee has said it will investigate Belarus's Olympic team, but activists have called for the country's Olympic committee to be suspended and its athletes to compete as neutrals.

Spokesman Mark Adams said Wednesday that the IOC had received a report from Belarus's

Olympic committee, which was "being evaluated."

And he said the IOC has opened a disciplinary commission "to establish facts in this case."

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

Lukashenko and his son Viktor have been banned from Olympic events over the targeting of athletes for their political views.

Shortly before the Tokyo Games, Lukashenko warned sports officials and athletes that he expected results in Japan.

"Think about it before going," he said. "If you come back with nothing, it's better for you not to come back at all."

The alleged attempt to return Tsimanouskaya to Belarus has prompted condemnation, with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken accusing Minsk of "another act of transnational repression."

In power since 1994, Lukashenko sparked international outrage in May by dispatching a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair plane flying from Greece to Lithuania to arrest a dissident on board.

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 "murder disguised as suicide," while activists accused authorities of "an operation... to liquidate a Belarusian who presented a true danger to the regime."

The United Nations has called on Ukrainian authorities to conduct a "thorough, impartial and effective investigation" into the death.

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