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Plane Carrying Fleeing Belarusian Olympic Sprinter Lands In Poland

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Sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya refused to return to Belarus after criticizing her coaches and the country's sports authorities. **AP / TASS**

Belarusian Olympic sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya landed in Poland on Wednesday, where she is 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 the protection of Tokyo 2020 staff on Sunday, saying her team was trying to bundle her onto a plane after she publicly criticized her coaches.

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.

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

aircraft.

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Images released by the Austrian chancellery showed her sporting a red face mask and being welcomed at the airport by government minister Magnus Brunner.

Brunner confirmed to reporters afterwards that Tsimanouskaya would be continuing on to Poland and that her route from Japan had been changed for "security reasons."

Brunner said he had spoken to her briefly and that she had seemed "well, considering the circumstances."

"She is worried about her family. She is tired and naturally she is tense after what has happened over the past few days," Brunner said, adding she was "nervous about how things will progress forward now."

She then took a second flight, operated by Polish airline LOT, which landed in Warsaw at 8:11 pm (1811 GMT).

Before leaving Tokyo, Tsimanouskaya spent two nights sheltering in the Polish embassy there after calling for international help.

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 Arseny Zdanevich 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.

"I have successfully received a visa and am very grateful to the Polish ambassador for helping me so quickly," Zdanevich told AFP, but declined to say when he would travel to Poland.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said Tuesday he had spoken to the "courageous" Tsimanouskaya.

"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."

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 US 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."

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