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UN Expert Sounds Alarm on 2,000 ‘Political Prisoners’ in Russia

By AFP

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Andrey Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency

The first anniversary of Alexei Navalny's death in jail is a stark reminder that Moscow is holding "more than 2,000 political prisoners," the UN's expert on rights in Russia said Monday.

Their lives remain at grave risk unless they are released immediately, claimed Mariana Katzarova, the United Nations' special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia.

"These detainees must be freed before another political prisoner loses their life in Russian custody, just like Navalny did a year ago," she said in a statement.

Navalny — Russian President Vladimir Putin's main opponent declared "extremist" by Moscow — died on February 16, 2024, in Penal Colony No. 3 in Kharp, above the Arctic Circle.

Anybody in Russia who mentions Navalvy or his Anti-Corruption Foundation without stating that they have been declared "extremist" is subject to fines, or up to four years in prison for repeated offenses.

Katzarova said Russia had failed to conduct a credible investigation into his death, and bore "sole responsibility" for it.

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She said Navalny's death exposed the "systematic and widespread" repression against peaceful dissenters to Moscow's "ongoing erosion" of human rights and rule of law, and its full-scale invasion of neighboring Ukraine.

"The sad anniversary of Alexei Navalny's death is a stark reminder about more than 2,000 political prisoners in Russia, many of whom face life-threatening conditions," Katzarova said.

She said eight died in prison in 2024, and identified at least 120 in "imminent danger," saying they should be released immediately due to their state of health.

Katzarova said 12 children had been jailed on charges of "terrorism" and "extremism."

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, "thousands of Ukrainians have been deported to Russia, subjected to enforced disappearance and experienced systematic torture, including rape and sexual violence," the special rapporteur's statement said.

"The basis for meaningful peace negotiations to end the war against Ukraine, should be at the minimum, the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Russia, and the return of all Ukrainian detainees held in Russian prisons," said Katzarova.

"Instead, Russian authorities have threatened to initiate new purges against human rights defenders."

UN special rapporteurs are independent experts mandated by the Human Rights Council to report their findings. They do not, therefore, speak for the United Nations itself.

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