

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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(Moscow) Belarusian authorities should immediately end all harassment and intimidation of the political prisoners Ales Bialiatski and Zmitser Dashkevich, Human Rights Watch said today. [Belarus](#) should order an immediate investigation of all instances of mistreatment of detainees held on politically motivated charges, which activists say has increased recently, Human Rights Watch said.

Platform, a Belarusian human rights group that provides legal assistance to prisoners, filed a complaint on September 28, 2012 to the UN special rapporteur on torture alleging that Dashkevich has been severely mistreated in the penal colony where he is being held. Andrei Bandarenka, the head of Platform, told Human Rights Watch that Dashkevich has been subjected to repeated threats of physical violence, including rape and murder, by the administration of the penal colony as well as verbal abuse, and arbitrary punishments, including undue restrictions on meetings with his family. Ales Bialiatski's colleagues and others have expressed concern that he is frequently subjected to psychological pressure and unfair punishments.

Mistreatment of detainees is prohibited under any circumstances, said [Yulia Gorbunova](#), Europe and Central Asia researcher at Human Rights Watch. These latest instances of harassment further demonstrate that the Belarusian authorities intend to continue retaliating against their critics even after they are thrown in jail.

Belarusian human rights groups report that the government has intensified the crackdown on dissent in recent weeks, including increasing pressure on political prisoners, ahead of a European Union meeting about sanctions on Belarus.

Family and friends had publicly expressed their concern about the poor state of Dashkevich's health, which has been deteriorating rapidly over the past few months. Dashkevich, an opposition activist and a leader of the youth opposition movement Young Front, was convicted in March 2011 in connection with participation in peaceful protests following the December 2010 presidential elections. In August 2012, a court added an additional year to Dashkevich's two-year sentence for repeatedly disobeying orders of the administration of the penal colony. Belarusian and international human rights groups have called both sentences politically motivated. Following his second sentencing, Dashkevich was transferred to a penal colony in the city of Mazyr.

Human Rights Watch and other human rights groups are also concerned about the alleged mistreatment in detention of Ales Bialiatski, head of Viasna, the Belarusian human rights center, who was [arrested on politically motivated charges](#) of tax evasion in August 2011. In November 2011, Bialiatski was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison and confiscation of all his assets. In February, he was transferred to the Bobruiskaya penal colony No. 2.

A Viasna staff member told Human Rights Watch that Bialiatski has been prohibited from meetings with relatives since May and has been held in almost complete isolation from the outside world for the last few months. In June, Bialiatski was labeled a repeated violator of the conditions of his detention by the prison authorities, which made him ineligible for amnesty under an amnesty law signed by the president in June.

Ales Bialiatski's colleagues from Viasna and other Belarusian human rights groups have on many occasions expressed concern that the staff at the Bobruiskaya colony regularly subject Bialiatski to arbitrary reprimands in the form of restrictions on his mealtimes and permission to receive parcels from his friends and family members, ostensibly as punishment for violating rules. The staff also prohibit other detainees from talking to Bialiatski or showing him support, threaten them with disciplinary measures such as being placed in a punishment cell if they do, human rights groups have reported.

Valentin Stefanovich, vice-president of Viasna, told Human Rights Watch that the intensified harassment of political prisoners appeared to be part of the Belarusian authorities' most recent crackdown ahead of a European Union Foreign Affairs Council session in October, where member states will be considering extending targeted sanctions against Belarus. The crackdown could be aimed at pressuring

outspoken critics to ask for presidential pardon and to sign statements acknowledging their guilt.

The European Union has in the past called on the authorities of Belarus to release all political prisoners immediately and unconditionally. In April, August, and September, in an apparent response to growing international criticism, the government pardoned a number of prisoners sentenced in connection with the December 2010 protests. Released prisoners later alleged that they were pressured to sign pardon requests acknowledging their guilt as conditions for their release.

It is a complete disgrace that the authorities appear to be singling out detainees held on politically motivated charges and using them as bargaining chips in a political game. Gorbunova said. The harassment of Bialiatski, Dashkevich, and other detainees should stop immediately and all instances of mistreatment should be thoroughly investigated.

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