Tomorrow's Affairs
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By: TA | AP Insight

Female political prisoners in Belarus face abuse, humiliation and threats of losing parental rights

Antanina Kanavalava says her four years in a Belarusian penal colony as a political prisoner were filled with a fear and anguish that still haunts her.

She nearly lost parental rights to her two young children when she was initially arrested. Her eyesight deteriorated from sewing military uniforms in a dimly lit room.

Denied access to even basic needs like feminine hygiene products, she used rags or whatever she could find amid unsanitary conditions.

“Women in prison go through hell and can’t even complain to anyone,” Kanavalava, 37, told The Associated Press after her release in December. “The head of the prison told me straight out that people like me should be put against the wall and shot.”

Belarus has nearly 1,200 political prisoners. While all endure harsh conditions like unheated cells, isolation and poor nutrition and health care, human rights officials say the 178 women behind bars are particularly vulnerable.

Pavel Sapelka, a lawyer with the Viasna human rights center, says women are often singled out for abuse and humiliation, threatened with losing their children, and having medical problems ignored.

Sapelka cited the case of Hanna Kandratsenka, 30, who died of cervical cancer in February, months after getting her freedom. She was diagnosed in prison but denied early release for treatment, he said.

Independent experts appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council describe “appalling” conditions for women in Belarusian prisons, with “a blatant lack of accountability for the ill treatment.”

Authoritarian President Lukashenko has ruled Belarus for over three decades, living up to his nickname of “Europe's last dictator” by silencing dissent and extending his rule through elections the West calls neither free nor fair.

A harsh crackdown followed a disputed 2020 vote, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets. Over 65,000 people were arrested, thousands were beaten by police and hundreds of independent media outlets and nongovernmental organizations were closed and outlawed.

Opposition figures are either imprisoned or have fled abroad. Among those behind bars is Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, the founder of Viasna, and Maria Kolesnikova, an opposition leader. Although Lukashenko has freed over 300 political prisoners in the last year, still others are arrested in a revolving door of repression.

U.S. President Donald Trump said last week on social media that he spoke with Lukashenko and encouraged him to release more. On Friday, Lukashenko responded: “Take them, bring them over there.”

Of the harsh conditions, Lukashenko says Belarus treats inmates “normally,” adding that “prison is not a resort.”

The government has refused to allow international monitors and independent observers into the prisons.

A mother's trauma

Kanavalava was a confidant of opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who challenged Lukashenko in the 2020 election but later fled the country amid the subsequent protests.

With her husband also jailed, Kanavalava was convicted of “participating in mass riots” and sentenced to 5 1/2 years.

Authorities threatened to send her 6-year-old son, Ivan, and 4-year-old daughter, Nasta, to an orphanage at the start of her sentence.

“For a mother not to see her children for four years is real torture," she told AP. "The

authorities know this and rub salt into this maternal wound every day, demanding I sign confessions and cooperate."

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The U.N. experts said female prisoners in Belarus were subject to "arbitrary punishment, including solitary confinement and incommunicado detention without contact with their children."

Kanavalava likened it to being a "hostage," saying she was forced to cooperate with authorities because "I wanted to survive for the sake of my children."

Their grandmother ultimately took them to Warsaw, where they were reunited with their mother following her pardon and early release in January,

Washing with warm tea

Former political prisoner Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk, 50, spent more than four years behind bars in several detention centers and penal colonies, serving 270 days in solitary confinement.

Held in a KGB detention center with no hot water, she used warm tea that she was served to wash herself, Sharenda-Panasiuk said, describing unsanitary conditions where illnesses "become chronic due to the constant cold."

"The authorities deliberately exploit women's vulnerabilities to humiliate them and create unbearable conditions," she added.

Physical abuse and hunger strikes

The U.N. experts expressed particular concern for Viktoryia Kulsha, who was initially sentenced to 2 1/2 years for moderating a Telegram messaging channel that urged drivers to block streets during the 2020 protests. Four more years were tacked on for allegedly disobeying prison officials.

Human rights groups say the 43-year-old has gone on at least six hunger strikes protesting abuses in Penal Colony No. 24 in Zarechcha.

The U.N. experts said in May her condition "has been life-threatening for some time now."

Sharenda-Panasiuk, who was in the same penal colony, said she saw a guard in 2023 punch Kulsha in the back, causing her to fall. The same guard later choked her by grabbing her from behind, she added.

"Viktoria slit her veins and went on hunger strikes in protest against the tyranny of the prison authorities and this slaughterhouse, but it kept getting worse and they are driving her to the brink," Sharenda-Panasiuk said. "Her illnesses have worsened. ... She has problems with her breasts, with the thyroid gland."

> Women often work 12–14 hours a day, including Sundays, to meet quotas

Conditions in Penal Colony No. 24 are among the harshest, she said, describing stints in solitary confinement as torture. Women often work 12–14 hours a day, including Sundays, to meet quotas.

They are under 24-hour surveillance, are not allowed walks outside, must wear the same clothes constantly and often have no opportunity to bathe.

Strip searches are conducted by both male and female employees, Sharenda-Panasiuk said, and "during a transfer from place to place, it was mainly men who searched me."

Stints in a 'shame cage'

Natallia Dulina was arrested in 2022, convicted of extremism — a common charge for dissidents — and sentenced to 3 1/2 years. She was pardoned and released in June with 13 other political prisoners, and taken to neighboring Lithuania following a visit to Minsk by U.S. special envoy Keith Kellogg.

The 60-year-old Italian teacher at Minsk State Linguistic University described particularly harsh treatment at Penal Colony No. 4, including the installation of a “shame cage” in the courtyard. Women are forced to stand in the cage for hours, in all weather, to punish them for disciplinary violations, she said.

It is impossible to get used to the tyranny of the Belarusian authorities - Antanina Kanavalava

No such cages exist in men's penal colonies, Sapelka said, and “the authorities will come up with new ways to abuse women in particular.” U.N. experts called this punishment "inhuman and degrading.”

“I decided that if someone ever tries to put me in this cage, I simply will not go there — I’ll go straight into solitary confinement,” Dulina said in an interview from Vilnius.

She described arbitrary punishment, adding she once lost visitation rights for feeding bread to a pigeon. Despite the harsh conditions, she said she refused to admit guilt or request a pardon.

Kanavalava, who lives in Warsaw with her family, admits that “prison is not over yet” for her because her husband still has nearly two years left on his sentence.

Neither is the anxiety. She said “the fear of losing my own children haunts me even in my dreams.”

“It is impossible to get used to the tyranny of the Belarusian authorities, but it is even harder to explain to children and to yourself the high price that Belarusians pay for their desire to be free,” Kanavalava said.