

Belarus Women Prisoners Face Abuse and Threats

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TALLINN, Estonia, Female political prisoners in Belarus are enduring severe abuse, humiliation, and threats of losing their parental rights, according to human rights advocates and former detainees. The accounts highlight a system of deliberate cruelty under President Alexander Lukashenko's decades-long rule.

Antanina Kanavalava, a mother of two and a former political prisoner, described her four years in a penal colony as “hell,” recounting unsanitary conditions, long hours sewing military uniforms in poor lighting, and denial of basic hygiene products. She nearly lost custody of her children during her imprisonment.

“The authorities know how to break a mother,” Kanavalava said after her release, explaining that she was forced to cooperate with prison officials to preserve parental rights. Her children were eventually taken to Warsaw, where they were reunited after her early release in January.

Rights groups say Belarus holds nearly 1,200 political prisoners, with 178 of them women. While all face harsh conditions such as cold cells and lack of medical care, women are often subjected to unique punishments.

Pavel Sapelka, a lawyer with the Viasna human rights center, said female inmates are threatened with the loss of their children and often denied treatment for serious health conditions. He cited the case of Hanna Kandratsenka, who died of cervical cancer after being denied early release for medical care.

United Nations-appointed experts have condemned the “appalling” treatment of women in Belarusian prisons, pointing to arbitrary punishments, solitary confinement, and denial of contact with children.

Former prisoner Palina Sharenda-Panasiuk spent over four years in custody, including 270 days in solitary confinement. She described being forced to wash herself with tea due to lack of hot water and said illnesses became chronic in the cold, unsanitary facilities.

Another case, Viktoryia Kulsha, drew international concern after she reportedly endured multiple hunger strikes protesting conditions in Penal Colony No. 24. Witnesses said guards physically assaulted her, and U.N. experts warned her life was at risk.

At the same colony, strip searches were conducted by both male and female guards. Prisoners were forced into long hours of labor, deprived of fresh air, and subjected to humiliating punishments.

Natallia Dulina, a university lecturer sentenced to three and a half years for “extremism,” reported the installation of a “shame cage” at Penal Colony No. 4. Women were forced to

stand in the cage outdoors for hours in all weather conditions, a punishment not used in men's prisons.

Dulina said she was punished for minor infractions, such as feeding bread to a pigeon, and described the treatment as degrading and inhumane.

The United States has pressed Belarus to release prisoners. Former President Donald Trump said last week that he urged Lukashenko to free more detainees. Lukashenko responded dismissively, stating, "Take them, bring them over there."

Although over 300 political prisoners have been released in the last year, arrests continue. Among those still imprisoned are Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski and opposition leader Maria Kolesnikova.

For many women, freedom does not end their suffering. Kanavalava, now living with her children in Warsaw, said her husband remains behind bars and the trauma persists. "The fear of losing my own children haunts me even in my dreams," she said.