



BELARUS: CRACKDOWN ON MEDICS
‘DO YOU WANT ONE OF YOUR CHILDREN TO DISAPPEAR?’



Health professionals have found themselves at the very centre of the human rights crisis in Belarus. Wearing iconic white robes, they marched through city centres together with other peaceful protesters. Risking their own safety, they provided first aid to those injured by police at protests and to torture survivors released from detention centres.

These doctors and nurses, many of whom have fought long battles to save patients' lives in COVID-19 wards without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), are now facing horrific persecution for showing their dissent during the peaceful protests that swept Belarus after the presidential election on 9 August 2020. Perhaps the most famous case is that of anaesthesiologist Artsyom Sarokin, who was prosecuted for disclosing medical information about Raman Bandarenka, a protester who had been severely beaten up in police custody and died in hospital shortly afterwards. Contradicting the official version that Bandarenka was drunk, Artsyom Sarokin shared information with journalist Katsyaryna Barysevich that there was no alcohol in Raman's bloodstream. The government accused them both of revealing medical secrets, and criminal investigations were launched against them. These resulted in a fine and a suspended prison sentence for Sarokin, while Barysevich was fined and sentenced to six months in a penal colony.

In interviews for this briefing Amnesty staff were repeatedly told that mass dismissals of dissenting doctors have created a catastrophic situation in many medical facilities, especially in provincial areas. Some hospitals and clinics now lack medical specialists, and in order to find adequate treatment people need to travel long distances.

In November 2020, Amnesty International called for urgent action to protect Volha Vialichka, the dissenting director of the Hrodna children's hospice, from state harassment. For Volha's safety and that of her children she had to flee Belarus. Now the Hrodna children's hospice is at risk of closing and ending the provision of care for terminally ill children.

Across Belarus, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest the results of the widely-disputed presidential election on 9 August 2020. The incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, while Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya emerged as a popular candidate for protest voters. The authorities unleashed an egregious and violent crackdown on peaceful protesters and others expressing dissent. Riot police have used unlawful force against peaceful protesters and tens of thousands have been detained solely for protesting peacefully. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread. Over 30,000 people have been detained under administrative legislation for taking part in peaceful demonstrations and over 3,000 have been prosecuted under criminal charges related to mass events and protests, with hundreds already sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Countless allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of those detained have emerged, with the perpetrators enjoying complete impunity.

People across the country continue to express their dissent peacefully, and reprisals against them continue. The shocking clampdown in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: women, children, artists, older people, students and academics, trade unionists and other groups have all been targeted. In its #StandWithBelarus campaign, Amnesty International has spoken with activists, local human rights defenders and individual rights holders who have been targeted as part of the pervasive nature of government repression.

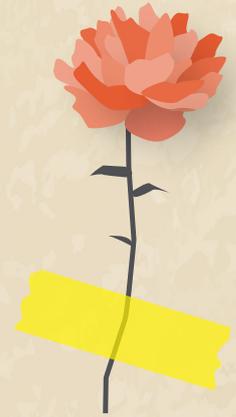
This briefing covers four stories of health professionals who were either dismissed from their jobs or forced to stop working. Their stories are very different yet emblematic of the fate of countless others who have paid dearly for supporting peaceful protest.



KANSTANTSIN, DOCTOR

(not his real name)

‘In early April 2021, I was released from my latest detention. Sleep-deprived and hungry, I came home, had breakfast, took a shower, changed clothes and went straight to work. A few days later the state hospital administration suddenly organised a special disciplinary hearing. I was accused of coming to work late,’ says Kanstantsin.



Kanstantsin immediately wrote a letter of explanation in which he described the details of his detention, such as not having a mattress to sleep on and being unable to shower for more than two weeks, as well as stressing the importance of hygiene in his role as a doctor. His statement was never considered, instead the hospital administration rushed through a notice of dismissal.

‘My hospital colleagues went to the administration to defend me but were sarcastically asked, ‘Why didn’t you meet him outside the detention centre with clean clothes?’

A few days later a private clinic, where Kanstantsin also practised, asked for his resignation.

‘They told me that the Ministry of Health had warned them that if they didn’t ask me to resign, their license would be revoked,’ says Kanstantsin.

Kanstantsin was released from his latest detention in April 2021. Before that he had been arrested and detained multiple times for participating in peaceful protests, including protests of health workers.

The first detention took place in August 2020 – shortly after the result of the presidential election was announced and provoked mass peaceful protests. Riot police used batons and rubber bullets against fleeing protesters. Kanstantsin was among them and he sustained a serious injury to his leg. Despite having an open wound he was made to kneel for four hours at the police station. Later he was squeezed into a 10-person cell with around 30 other detainees, and did not receive any food for the first 24 hours of his detention.

During Kanstantsin’s subsequent detentions totalling nine weeks, he was repeatedly beaten, once with a hat pulled over his head so that he couldn’t see anything.

‘Peaceful protesters and activists received much harsher treatment than other prisoners. Warm water in our cells was switched off, our mattresses and all bedding was taken away, at night we were forced to wake up many times. But that’s not even the worst part. Sometimes in the morning when we left our cells for inspection, prison guards poured concentrated chlorine on the floor. This poisoned us and caused difficulty breathing. They also took away our pens and paper so that we couldn’t write to anyone about what was happening to us,’ shares the doctor.

Even in these inhumane conditions, Kanstantsin’s instinct to care for others continued. One of his cellmates arrived in prison with an injured and swollen leg and Kanstantsin managed to convince the guards to arrange a visit from the prison doctor.

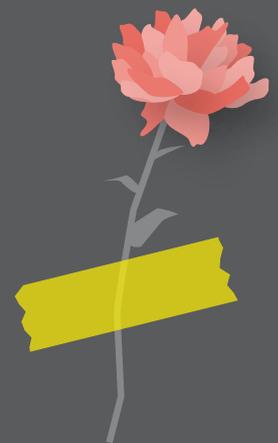
Kanstantsin believes that despite the severe shortage of doctors and nurses in many hospitals, no medical facility in Belarus will hire him because of his participation in the protests.

‘The healthcare situation in Belarus, especially in provincial areas, is catastrophic. People are dying because they do not receive even the most basic care. During the worst times of the COVID-19 pandemic doctors worked non-stop and received no recognition. Instead, the government fires dissenting doctors and nurses and threatens many others,’ he says.

HALINA, NURSE

‘I didn’t want to leave my job until the very end. But when one day two men with no official identification walked over to me on the street and said: ‘Do you want one of your children to disappear?’, I knew that I had no other choice,’ says a nurse called Halina.

Halina had been involved in activism long before the 2020 presidential elections. She raised awareness about lack of freedoms in the country and in 2017 was detained at a peaceful protest.



‘At the time everyone was laughing at us. But people’s lives were getting more and more difficult and I saw that their attitudes towards politics begin to change. The mass protests were coming, I knew that,’ she says.

In spring 2020, Halina signed up to volunteer as an independent observer during the August elections. Shortly afterwards she contracted COVID-19 in the hospital where she worked and became very ill.

‘I treated COVID-19 patients with just a pair of gloves and no PPE. Obviously it was only a matter of time until I got it myself. Up to 60 percent of my lungs were affected, I had double pneumonia and my recovery was long and painful,’ remembers Halina.

Her return to work coincided with the beginning of the August 2020 protests and her hospital was flooded with victims of police violence.

‘I saw all these mutilated people – with broken bones, with faces ripped to pieces, with swollen heads the size of a balloon. We weren’t allowed to write down descriptions of injuries and were constantly threatened with reprisals. Still, every night after my shift I joined other peaceful protesters and stood shoulder to shoulder with other doctors and nurses’.

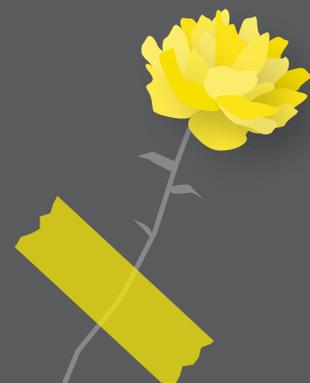
Soon a vicious campaign of reprisals was launched against Halina. In mid-September 2020, she was detained outside her house, taken to a police station and fined for participating in an “unauthorized” meeting. During her detention Halina was hit on the back of the head, threatened with a long prison sentence, and with the possibility of her children being taken into state care.

Halina continued participating in protests and in October the hospital administration asked her to resign. Halina refused and instead questioned the administration about their failed promise to pay COVID-19 bonuses to medical staff. Two days later, on the way home from work, she was met by two men in plain clothes who threatened her with the disappearance of her children.

‘Who were those people – riot police, police or just criminals? I never found out. The only thing I knew is that in Belarus I had no one to turn to, nowhere to hide’.

Halina resigned and tried to find other employment:

‘I was refused everywhere I went. Even when applying for the most basic jobs that nobody wanted. There must have been a red tick next to my name’.



The threats and harassment against her didn't stop there. In early November 2020, she was called to the investigator's office as a witness in three criminal cases.

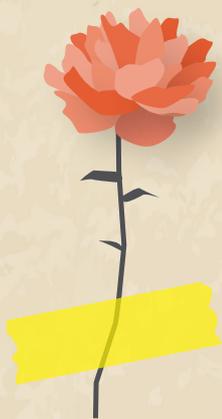
'People were accused of writing slogans on apartment blocks and of damaging a police car. I knew it was only a matter of time until a criminal case against me would be drawn up. Social services started enquiring about my child and it was clear that they were following up on their threat to put my children into state care. So I took them out of school and moved out of our apartment'.

When Halina came to collect her things, some neighbours told her that in her absence law enforcement officials had come looking for her three times. She didn't return to her home again – instead in late November 2020 she and her children fled Belarus.

Now Halina is safe but life continues to be a daily struggle. Together with her older daughter she takes on occasional cleaning jobs while the local Belarusian diaspora helps by giving her second-hand clothes and toys.

'I'm still crying every day. I couldn't even imagine such cruelty towards ordinary peaceful people. And what for? For our desire to have a better life. A fairer society,' says Halina.

ALYAKSEI, UROLOGIST



'On the election day I travelled to my place of registration to vote. I wore a white bracelet so that independent election observers could count me as a Tikhanouskaya supporter. This was an initiative introduced by the opposition coalition as everyone knew there would be election fraud,' says urologist Alyaksei.

After voting he returned to Minsk, continued with his work in a local hospital and participated in protests in-between shifts. When a volunteer camp was set up outside Zhodzina prison where numerous peaceful protesters were detained, Alyaksei and his wife immediately headed there to offer help. On the way to Zhodzina, they bought hygiene products and a case of drinking water for the released detainees.

Once at the camp Alyaksei provided emergency medical support to released detainees who had been tortured in detention. He assessed injuries and referred some to urgent hospital care, dressed wounds and treated bruises.

‘Some released detainees lived far away and needed to travel home by train. Volunteers gave them lifts to train stations or even took them to their homes. I stayed until about one in the morning and then headed home to get some sleep before my morning shift,’ says the doctor.

The suffering he had witnessed at Zhodzina prison followed Alyaksei into his hospital. When he arrived at work, he was told of a young man who was brought to hospital straight from detention and required an emergency operation.

‘As a result of being tortured he had a severe scrotum injury and I explained to him that during the operation a part of his testicle would be removed. The operation went well and a few days later he was discharged’.

Little did Alyaksei know that he would soon require emergency treatment himself.

In early September, Alyaksei was driving past the place where Alyaksandr Taraikousky had been shot dead point-blank by security forces. The doctor saw a group of volunteers – they were cleaning up a makeshift people’s memorial in Taraikousky’s honour that had been covered with sand. Police officers stood next to them and ordered them to disperse.

‘I joined the volunteers and when one police officer started verbally abusing us, I asked him to show us his ID. He walked over to me and said: ‘You won’t return home today’.

A moment later Alyaksei heard a loud shriek from a young woman. When he raised his head, he saw a dozen men in plain clothes with no insignia charging towards him. He was dragged into a police bus where one of them drew all the curtains.

‘I then knew what was coming and only said: ‘I’m a doctor. Don’t break my hands’. But that comment only increased their fury. They pulled my T-shirt over my head so that I couldn’t see and then kicked and punched me everywhere. But the beating didn’t stop there. When I was finally brought to a police station, I was kicked in the head, still with my T-shirt over it and during an interrogation a man in civilian clothes punched me in the chest’.

Whilst at the police station Alyaksei experienced a sharp pain in his head and spotted blood in his urine but was denied an ambulance. Instead he was charged with participating in an “unauthorized” meeting and with disobeying a police officer, and then he was transferred to the notorious Akrestsina detention centre. There, Alyaksei again asked for medical assistance but was told to wait.

The following day Alyaksei had his court hearing during which he developed a fever and vomiting, and struggled to keep his head up. At 3 pm the ambulance was finally called and he was transferred to a hospital. There he was diagnosed with concussion, a spinal injury, kidney contusion and tearing of both eardrums.

Alyaksei's health was damaged and even a month later he struggled to stand for more than a few minutes. A return to work seemed unfeasible and his colleague sent him a link to a rehabilitation programme in the Czech Republic. Alyaksei applied and a few weeks later he and his wife left Belarus.

'Soon after arriving in the Czech Republic, I found out that Belarusian officials from the Economic Crime Department were looking for me in relation to a donation I had received from abroad. This donation covered our basic living expenses when I wasn't able to work. Now the state is cracking down on any foreign donations to peaceful protesters,' shares Alyaksei.

What was meant to be a temporary medical visit turned into permanent relocation. Recently the Czech government launched a programme for medical professionals who have fled Belarus and Alyaksei hopes to soon confirm his medical qualifications. While in the Czech Republic he also heard of someone he hadn't expected to receive news about again:

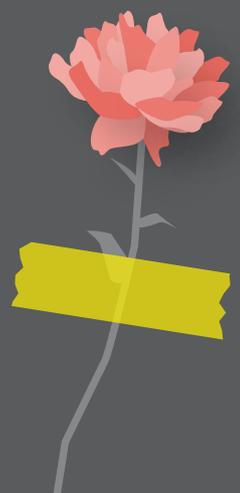
'I was told that the badly beaten up man on whom I operated back in August had also received rehabilitation in the same programme. Apparently he was recovering well,' says Alyaksei with a tremor in his voice.

DOCTOR A, CHILDREN'S DOCTOR

(pseudonym)

'I am a children's doctor. I was fired from my job for a comment on social media. In that comment I said that I would never be able to forgive the brutality shown by the police, and what they did to my son and many other tortured peaceful protesters,' says Doctor A.

Doctor A's son had been arrested at a peaceful protest in which the two of them marched side by side. He was detained in the afternoon, but Doctor A didn't know of his whereabouts until the following morning.



'They dragged him into the bus in front of my eyes. I begged the policemen to arrest me instead. They twisted my arms behind my back and put me on my back on the pavement. When they released me, I ran to a local police station and waited outside its walls together with other families. At midnight they read out the names of new detainees but my son wasn't among them. So I rushed to another police station and then another and only found out where he was being detained at 6 in the morning. While in detention he was beaten with a baton and made to stand in the same position for many hours. How can I forgive that? How can any mother?'

Doctor A's comment on social media was written under the post of another Belarusian medic back in winter 2021 and for a few months there was no reaction to it. But then in April Doctor A's hospital received a sudden threatening call about her. Doctor A was informed about it straight away and forty minutes later she was summoned into the director's office. There the hospital director read out her comment on social media, lectured her on how a medical professional had to be 'above politics' and asked her to resign.

'I was too appalled to say anything. I wrote my letter of resignation in my office and handed it to my manager. She quickly took it from my hand, without saying a word,' Doctor A remembers.

After recovering from the initial shock, she went to the director's office and asked for her resignation letter back.

'I was told that I had already been officially dismissed. Usually it takes weeks, if not months. With me it happened in a few minutes. When I told the mums of my little patients, that I would no longer be able to help them, a few of them began to cry. I kept on thinking: 'This is not real. It can't be.'

Over the next few days Doctor A was fired from a private clinic where she had also worked and became unemployed:

'I tried applying for jobs in a few private medical centres but was told that my documentation wouldn't be approved by the authorities. So now my son and I live on what little help people offer us. There are lots of kind people in Belarus. I just don't know for how long we'll manage to continue like this'.

Doctor A is haunted by memories from her days of volunteering outside the walls of Akrestsina detention centre. In the first week of protests in August 2020, thousands of peaceful protesters were tortured in detention centres, and together with other medical professionals Doctor A provided assistance to released detainees:

'I saw unthinkable, horrible things. I can still see them, those brutally beaten up people, as if they are right in front of me. They say a doctor should be ready for anything, but I wasn't ready for what I saw. One released detainee whose wounds I was treating was a tall young man. He saw the look in my eyes and gave me a hug. 'Don't cry. Just don't cry, doctor,' he whispered.



JOIN OUR SOLIDARITY ACTION

- 1 Take or create a picture of a flower.
- 2 Write a solidarity message in support of Belarusian medics.
- 3 Post this image on your Instagram, Facebook or Twitter.
- 4 Tag @amnesty and we will share.
- 5 Use hashtag #StandWithBelarus.

