

protect local Indigenous people against attacks by Bengali settlers led to several clashes and injuries on both sides.

■ At least 20 people were injured in a clash between Indigenous people and Bengali settlers in Rangamati on 22 September. Local people said security forces came to the scene but failed to stop the violence.

Workers' rights

Trade union leaders supporting garment factory workers' rallies against low pay and poor working conditions were harassed and intimidated. One man was killed.

■ Trade union leader Aminul Islam went missing on 4 April. He was found dead a day later in Ghatail town, north of Dhaka. His family saw evidence of torture on his body and believed he had been abducted by security forces. He had previously been arrested and beaten by members of the National Security Intelligence for his trade union activities.

■ At least 111 workers died from burns and other injuries, some allegedly because factory officials refused to open the gates to let them escape a fire that broke out at Tazreen Fashion in Savar town, north of the capital Dhaka, in November.

Communal violence

Attacks against members of minority communities took a new turn in late September. Thousands of people protesting against an image posted on Facebook of the Qur'an, which they considered derogatory, set fire to more than 20 Buddhist temples and monasteries, one Hindu temple and scores of homes and shops in the southern cities of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong.

Death penalty

At least 45 people were sentenced to death. One man was executed in April.

BELARUS

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

Head of state:

Alyksandr Lukashenka

Head of government:

Mikhail Myasnikovich

Prisoners of conscience remained in detention; some were sentenced to increased prison terms for violating prison rules. Civil society activists, including human rights defenders and journalists, faced violations of their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. Three men were executed.

Background

On 5 July, the UN Human Rights Council voted to appoint a Special Rapporteur on Belarus, following the adoption of a report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights which documented a serious decline in the respect for human rights since December 2010.

Parliamentary elections on 23 September failed to return any opposition candidates. The OSCE election observation mission found violations of the rights to freedom of expression and association and concluded that the elections were not free or fair. On 27 August the Central Election Committee decreed that any candidates who called for an election boycott should be denied airtime, effectively depriving two opposition parties of any media coverage.

Prisoners of conscience

Six people remained in prison in connection with their participation in a demonstration on 19 December 2010, at least four of whom – Mykalaj Statkevich, Pavel Sevryarnets, Zmitser Dashkevich and Eduard Lobau – were prisoners of conscience.

■ On 24 January, Minsk City Court refused Ales Bialiatski's appeal against his four-and-a-half-year sentence for "concealment of income on a large scale", and in September the sentence was upheld by the Supreme Court. Ales Bialiatski, chairperson of Human Rights Centre Viasna, and Vice-President of the International Federation for Human Rights, was sentenced on 24 November 2011. The conviction was related to the use of personal bank accounts in Lithuania and Poland to support the work of Human Rights Centre Viasna in Belarus.

■ On 14 April, former opposition presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau was released following a presidential pardon. He was reportedly pressured into signing a request for a pardon, and was told that his criminal record would remain for eight years. He had served 16 months of his five-year sentence. Zmitser Bandarenka, a member of Andrei Sannikau's campaign team, was released on 15 April.

■ On 28 August, a court sitting in a closed session in Hlybokaye (Glubokoe) prison colony sentenced Zmitser Dashkevich to a further year in prison for allegedly violating prison rules. Zmitser Dashkevich had been repeatedly punished for various minor violations of prison rules; the prison authorities reportedly placed him in the punishment cell on some occasions to protect him from physical attacks by fellow prisoners.

Freedom of expression

The authorities continued to use the crimes of “libelling the President” and “insulting the President” against journalists to discourage legitimate criticism of government authorities.

■ On 21 June, Andrzej Poczobut, correspondent for the Polish daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and a prominent Polish-Belarusian minority activist, was arrested in his apartment in Hrodna and charged with “libelling the President” for articles published in Belarusian independent media. He was released on bail on 30 June. Andrzej Poczobut was already serving a three-year suspended prison sentence on the same charge for other newspaper articles. If found guilty under the new charge, he would serve both sentences consecutively and could face imprisonment for over seven years. At the end of the year the investigation was ongoing.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders were subjected to various forms of harassment, including travel bans and prosecution for administrative offences such as swearing in public. Valiantsin Stefanovich, deputy chair of the Human Rights Centre Viasna, was turned back at the Lithuanian border on 11 March, allegedly in connection with his failure to appear for military reserve duties. Oleg Volchek, a human rights lawyer, was informed in March that his name had been put on a list of those forbidden to leave the country.

■ On 26 June, shortly after the NGO Platforma – which monitors prison conditions – called for a boycott of the

2014 hockey championships in Minsk, its chair Andrei Bondarenko was officially warned by the Minsk City Prosecutor that he could be prosecuted for “discrediting the Republic of Belarus and its state institutions”. On 19 July, he was informed that he was on a list of people forbidden to leave the country because he was being investigated for tax evasion. The investigation against him was stopped and his name was removed from the list after he complained to the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

■ On 26 November, the staff of Human Rights Centre Viasna were evicted from their office when it was confiscated as part of the sentence against the chair of the organization, Ales Bialiatzky.

During 2012, at least 15 human rights activists, journalists and opposition activists were prosecuted under the administrative code for swearing in public.

Freedom of association

The Law on Public Associations continued to set out restrictive rules for the registration and functioning of organizations. All NGOs still required authorization from the state in order to function and it remained a criminal offence under Article 193 (1) of the Criminal Code to act in the name of an unregistered organization.

■ In January, the LGBTI organization Human Rights Project Gay Belarus was informed that its application for registration had been refused on the grounds that the names of two of the 61 founders were misspelled and that their dates of birth were incorrect.

■ On 9 October, Minsk Economic Court ruled that the prison-monitoring NGO Platforma should be liquidated. The organization was accused by Sovetskiy district tax authorities in Minsk of failing to present a declaration of income on time, or to inform the tax authorities of a change of address. Its chair, Andrei Bondarenko, insisted that he had presented the income declaration on time and the organization had not changed its legal address.

Freedom of assembly

The Law on Mass Events continued to impose unreasonable limits on assemblies. It required organizers of any pre-planned public gathering to report “financial sources” used and they were only allowed to publicize events after official permission was granted, which might not be until five days beforehand. Applications to hold public events were routinely denied for technical reasons.

■ Alexander Denisenko, a member of the independent trade union REP, was refused permission by the local authorities in Brest to hold a public event on 17 March to protest against the cost of housing. Refusal was made on the grounds that he did not have contracts with the police, the ambulance service and the local authorities regarding cleaning and hygiene facilities. Alexander Denisenko appealed against the decision of the local authorities to the court of first instance, the appeal court, the district court and the Supreme Court, all of which supported the decision of the local authorities.

Death penalty

Belarus continued to carry out executions in conditions of utmost secrecy. Neither the prisoners condemned to death, nor their relatives, are informed of the execution before it is carried out. The body is not returned to relatives and they are not informed of the burial site. They can be left waiting weeks or even months before they receive the official death notice.

■ Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau were executed in March in connection with a series of bomb attacks, most recently in a metro station in the capital Minsk on 11 April 2011. There were serious concerns over the fairness of the trial. As in the cases of Vasily Yuzepchuk and Andrei Zhuk (executed in March 2010), and Andrei Burdyko (executed in July 2011), the authorities ignored a request made by the UN Human Rights Committee not to execute Uladzslau Kavalyou and Dzmitry Kanavalau until it had considered their cases.

Amnesty International visits/reports

📄 Belarus: Continuing human rights concerns – submission to the 20th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (EUR 49/006/2012)

📄 Still behind bars: The plight of long-term prisoners in Belarus (EUR 49/013/2012)

📄 Belarus must release bodies of convicts executed over Minsk metro bombing (PRE01/146/2012)

BELGIUM

KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

Head of state:

King Albert II

Head of government:

Elio Di Rupo

The European Court of Human Rights found that Belgium had violated the right to a fair trial. The authorities took the first steps towards the creation of a National Human Rights Institution.

Unfair trials

The government was found to have used evidence that may have been obtained by torture in a trial of a terrorism suspect.

■ On 25 September, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in *El Haski v. Belgium* that, by using evidence likely to have been obtained through torture in criminal proceedings, Belgium had violated Lahoucine El Haski's right to a fair trial. He had been convicted in 2006 of participating in the activities of a terrorist group on the basis of testimonies of witnesses interrogated in third countries, including Morocco. The Court found that there was a "real risk" that statements used against him from Morocco may have been obtained through torture or other ill-treatment, and that the Belgian courts should have excluded such evidence.

Prison conditions

Psychiatric facilities for prisoners with mental disabilities continued to be inadequate. On 2 October the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Belgium had violated the right to liberty and security of L.B., a man with mental health problems, by detaining him for over seven years in prison facilities which were inadequate for his condition.

In December, the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture expressed concerns over overcrowding and inadequate sanitary facilities in many Belgian prisons.

Discrimination

Discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief continued, especially against Muslims, in public education and in the workplace. The general prohibition on wearing religious and cultural symbols and dress remained in force in Flemish public education.