**52nd session of the Human Rights Council,**

**Side Event: Accountability for international crimes**

**and serious human rights violations in Belarus**

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**Remarks by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus**

Mrs Chairperson, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to join this important side event remotely.

At this session of the Human Rights Council, the OEB (the UN Human Rights Office Examination on Belarus) will present its report and latest findings regarding, inter alia, gross violations committed in Belarus in the run-up to the 2020 presidential election and in its aftermath. The Belarusian justice system has failed to conduct independent, prompt, effective, and transparent investigations and hold perpetrators accountable of the reported human rights violations. Therefore, I believe it is crucial that the international community use the information gathered by the OEB and the findings in this report to step up efforts for the protection of victims and to facilitate criminal prosecution of alleged perpetrators, based on international law and universal jurisdiction.

As per the relevant HRC resolutions, I will continue to support the work of the OEB towards these goals, complementing all international efforts towards accountability and justice. Let me stress however that we are now approximately halfway between the 2020 election and the next presidential election due to be held in 2025. Yet my own monitoring of the situation of human rights in Belarus reveals an absolute absence of any efforts and political will on the part of the authorities to address the serious concerns that various international human rights mechanisms, civil society organizations and human rights defenders continue to raise.

The 2020 events made the headlines and sparked international attention, but my concern is that the continuously worsening human rights situation in Belarus could fall below the radar. There were no large-scale protests in Belarus for over 2 years because independent voices in the country have all been silenced: human rights defenders and journalists have been thrown behind bars, civil society crushed, trade unions dismantled, and a large portion of the population forced into exile.

Hence my assessment of the situation of human rights is that it worsened dramatically. Yet my work as a Special Procedures mandate-holder is not only to report yearly to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly about this deterioration: it also entails drawing public attention to *systemic* human rights violations, and the unwillingness of the authorities to follow our recommendations and comply with Belarus’ international obligations. One key instrument at the disposal of my mandate is the issuance of communications, such as allegation letters, on individual cases. Special Procedures mandate-holders sent no less than 10 such communications to the Government of Belarus last year. This channel has become particularly crucial for victims to make their voice heard inside the UN following the denunciation of the First Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Tomorrow, the court verdict against Ales Bialiatski, founder of human rights organisation Viasna, will be issued. The 2022 Nobel Peace Prize winner faces up to 12 years in prison. For what? For his relentless work as a human rights defender, including for documenting State abuses during the violent repression of the 2020 protests, but also for supporting victims and their relatives, as did his many colleagues behind bars. It is of great concern that the authorities are criminalizing human rights work at a time when the role of human rights defenders is most needed.

The number of people detained on politically motivated grounds in Belarus has risen to at least 1,400 according to information documented by Viasna. I am also concerned by the growing number of civil society organizations that have been deregistered. Over 700 such organizations and media groups have been forced to close their offices in Belarus since 2020. In addition, several hundred civil society organizations were compelled to self-dissolve in order to avoid persecution.

I remain gravely concerned about the systematic denial and punishment for the exercise of freedom of expression, which will be the focus of my forthcoming report to the Council. According to BAJ, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 32 journalists and media workers are currently in detention. Some are serving long prison sentences under spurious treason charges, such as Belsat journalist Katsiaryna Andreyeva – sentenced last year to 8 years in jail, or Andrei Aliaksandrau, sentenced to 14 years, for his independent journalistic work which has been deemed ‘extremist’.

As a result of limitations to media freedoms and the closing down of all independent outlets, in Belarus people’s access to information is limited to State-run media, which operates under tight censorship. Only those with access to a VPN can see reports that reflect a diversity of opinions and access information that is independently verified and un-biased. However, accessing information online can come at the cost of personal freedom. Anyone who redistributes material from an “extremist organisation” risks criminal prosecution and imprisonment for up to seven years. In 2022 alone, the Office of the Prosecutor General launched more than 1600 criminal cases against organisations and individuals suspected of “extremist orientation”. Over 2700 people were also sentenced to administrative arrest for disseminating ‘extremist’ material.

My mandate continues to receive unsettling reports testifying of an ongoing deterioration of the human rights situation. This concerns notably the right to freedom of association, including the right to form political parties, join trade unions or otherwise participate in civil and political life, including by peaceful civic actions, offline or online. Initiatives in those spheres are perceived by the Belarusian authorities as illegitimate activism.

This suffocating climate has compelled hundreds of thousands of Belarusians to exile over the past 30 months. Those suspected of extremism who sought safety abroad risk being tried *in absentia* and possibly have their Belarusian citizenship withdrawn if found guilty. This measure of punishment contradicts international human rights standards on the prevention of statelessness. I hereby encourage all UN member states to exchange best practices for containing the ensuing risk of statelessness for Belarusians in exile.

Despite the risks, human rights defenders, journalists, trade union members and other independent professionals continue their work in Belarus as well. In this difficult reality, it is essential to continue supporting civil society actors in their efforts to promote and protect human rights in the country, including in the context of accountability for human rights violations.

As the primary responsibility for the promotion and protection of human rights rests with the authorities, I must reiterate my call on the Belarusian government to show political will to provide human rights-based solutions to the most pressing problems identified in my reports, including through the implementation of recommendations arising from my mandate and other UN human rights mechanisms.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to answering your questions.