

Statement: Caritas Belarus comments on the unrest in Belarus following the August 9 elections



The presidential election was held in Belarus on Sunday, 9 August 2020. At the onset of the election campaign, everyone in the country expected a repeat of the 2015 election with predictable candidates and the same outcome Belarusians have lived with for 26 years. Surprisingly, the campaign for this election had an unexpectedly lively start with new presidential candidates, unprecedented electoral activity, civic engagement, but also, harsh repressions.

Thousands of frustrated Belarusians took to the streets across the country to express their disbelief at the re-election of Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko. According to early results announced by the Central Election Commission (CEC), he gathered 80% of the vote.

Since 9 August, massive peaceful protests demanding fair elections and an honest count of the vote have been taking place in cities and towns across Belarus. Riot police used flash grenades, rubber bullets, batons, water cannons and tear gas against the demonstrators. On Monday, August 10, protests continued. Thousands were injured, five people were killed in the resulting unrest. According to eyewitnesses, police were beating protestors, with no regard for gender or age. Riot police were hiding in ambulances to ambush protesters. In total, police detained about 6,700 people in two days. Dozens of journalists covering the unrest have also been attacked and arrested. There was no internet connection in Belarus for three days. Many people were not even aware of what was going on in the country.

The detainees who were released from the pre-trial detention center in Minsk have given deeply shocking first-hand accounts of savage treatment, humiliation and torture, which they endured behind bars. Many were badly injured; some were taken to hospitals in ambulances. They had no access to water or food for several days.

Current events affect and touch us as people and as an organisation. Our most important duty as Caritas is to be close to people in need, and continue to provide this assistance within our current projects. As Caritas, we join the position of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Belarus who strongly condemn all forms of violence and call for truthfulness and dialogue.

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Statement from the director of Caritas Belarus - Father Vitaliy Dobrolovich:

Caritas is not politics, Caritas is the love of Christ, which is realised through a person to his neighbour. Caritas' mission is to come to the aid of everyone who needs it, to give hope where it seems lost and to show the spirit of love in the light of human life. Watching what is happening in our country today, each of us experiences different emotions and feelings. On the one hand, it is an intolerable pain for those who were innocently condemned and tortured, for those who, in tears, seek truth and justice, and on the other - joy and faith in the eyes of people who go to protect their loved ones with word and law. It is possible to enumerate, for a very long time, the experiences of people in Belarus these days. However, the most accurate words are those of Benedict XVI from the encyclical *Caritas in veritate*:

“Today we are witnessing a serious misunderstanding. At a time when, on the one hand, we notice the requirement of declared rights of arbitration and secondary character, their recognition and promotion by public structures, on the other hand, there are elementary and fundamental rights which are not recognized and violated in a very large part of humanity”

Now each of us is doing our best to help those who find themselves on the verge of pain and despair. These are not only numerous charity organisations, but also people with a kind, sympathetic heart. It is very important today for everyone to be in solidarity with the victims. Caritas Belarus calls, in this difficult time, for our country to unite in prayer for all victims of peaceful protests, for a calm resolution of the conflict situations in Belarus, for an end to violence on our native land, and to join the effort of Pope Francis, who speaks to the world:

“My thoughts are directed to the dear Belarus. I follow with great attention the situation created after the elections in this country. I call for a dialogue, an end to violence, respect for justice and law. I trust all Belarusians in the care of the Mother of God, Queen of Peace”

Caritas Belarus would like to thank you for any signs of solidarity, your open hearts and strong support that the Caritas staff have felt over the past month.