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INTERNATIONAL SOS

Belarus: Urban centres: Continue to exercise caution, avoid anti-government protests


OVERVIEW

 Level:


Notice

 Location:

Belarus

 Category:

Civil unrest, Protest/Rally

 Active:

03 Feb 2021 - 04 Mar 2021

Last Updated: 03 Feb 2021 16:05 (GMT)

The table below shows the number of impacted and potentially impacted individuals and assets at the date/time the alert was issued. The counts include individuals within the impact radius of the alert and may not reflect the total number of people in each area listed.

Please log into [Tracker](#) for the latest information or [click here](#) for an up-to-date list of affected individuals and assets in the impacted area.

EXPOSURE IN IMPACTED AREA ONLY

Location	There Now	There in next 24 hours	There in next 1-7 days	There while the alert is active
Belarus (Low Risk)	5	5	5	6
TOTAL	5	5	5	6

Larger-scale protests calling for fresh elections, the resignation of President Alexander Lukashenko and the release of political prisoners continue **each Sunday** in the capital Minsk. Smaller gatherings are held in other urban centres. Demonstrators' current tactics involve decentralised, localised gatherings and solidarity events such as forming 'human chains'. The security forces continue to disperse such events and make indiscriminate arrests, posing incidental risks to bystanders. More than 150 people were detained during the latest round of protests on 31 January. All related gatherings should be avoided as security precaution.

MORE DETAIL

Protest fatigue and the continued tough stance of the security forces mean that recent gatherings have attracted smaller turnouts than in previous months. The security forces continue to pre-emptively cordon off roads and use stun grenades, water cannon and tear gas to disperse peaceful demonstrations. Disruption to mobile internet networks is also common in Minsk ahead of Sunday rallies. Protest locations typically include key public transport stops, symbolic monuments and government buildings.

According to independent monitors, at least five people have been killed, hundreds injured and thousands detained since the disputed August 2020 presidential election. There have also been widespread reports of attacks on, and arrests of, local and foreign journalists.

Opposition leader and presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya fled to neighbouring Lithuania following the polls, citing a fear of imprisonment, and remains in exile there. The authorities have placed her on a wanted list for allegedly publicly calling for actions that harm national security. Russia has also issued a warrant for Tsikhanouskaya's arrest under a bilateral agreement with Belarus. Other key opposition figures have either left the country fearing prosecution or have been detained.

ASSESSMENT

The All Belarusian People's Assembly (ABPA) will be held **on 11-12 February**. This forum, made up of politicians and citizens, typically discusses the country's socio-economic development, but according to the authorities this year's event will also cover political developments. This will be the sixth ABPA since 1996, and on each occasion the proceedings have been tightly controlled by the president's office. However, this year's iteration is unlikely to resolve the political impasse, particularly as Tsikhanouskaya and other key opposition figures are not participating. Lukashenko may offer limited political concessions in an attempt to appease protesters, but the opposition is insisting on his resignation.

The president continues to face international pressure to step down. The EU recently imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and other government officials. However, while Russia is keen for the president to legitimise his position to avert further instability, Lukashenko continues to enjoy broad support from Moscow. Therefore, while he may offer some political concessions, such as constitutional reforms, he is unlikely to relinquish office.

Lukashenko has faced increasing domestic criticism in recent months over his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stagnating economy. The value of the Belarusian ruble has significantly depreciated amid sustained political unrest. Nevertheless, while a large portion of the president's political base has joined the recent anti-government protests, most older citizens, industrial workers, police officers and troops have so far refrained from doing so.

Outside Minsk, protests have tapered off with gatherings in Brest (Brest region) now typically attracting a few

hundred people. However, protests and strikes by state-owned enterprises will exacerbate economic challenges by causing the prices of essential commodities to rise and discouraging foreign investment. These issues are liable to fuel further public discontent. Lukashenko will use the loyalty of the security forces, backing from Russia – including a promised loan worth \$1.5bn – and limited political concessions to stay in power.

The opposition, on the other hand, regards the prospect of significant constitutional changes under Lukashenko as remote. There will remain an elevated risk of detention for journalists, including foreigners. Activists and opposition figures, including individuals linked to Tsikhanouskaya's campaign and/or her Co-ordination Council, which was set up to facilitate a transfer of power, are also at risk.

WHAT WE ADVISED YOUR PEOPLE

Inbound travellers

Essential travel to Belarus may be possible subject to an itinerary- and profile-specific review. This assessment is made jointly by our medical and security professionals.

In-country employees

Liaise with local contacts to remain informed of any planned or ongoing gatherings in your area. Avoid all such events, reconfirm the status of routes before setting out and allow additional time for journeys. Anticipate a heightened security force presence around gatherings and follow official directives. Refrain from taking photographs of protesters and security force personnel. Carry relevant identification and travel documentation at all times to ease passage through spot-checks.

Ensure that you have access to reliable backup communications methods due to the risk of disruption to popular messaging and social media services. Further interruption of mobile networks and/or internet services is possible in the coming days.

Foreign nationals should avoid election-related protests due to the risk of unrest, which may entail the use of heavy-handed tactics, such as indiscriminate arrests, by the security forces. If arbitrarily detained, follow orders issued by law enforcement officials and ask to speak with a trusted local contact or diplomatic official. Journalists and local nationals attending demonstrations should exercise caution and maintain access to reliable communications in the event of an emergency.

Monitor our Belarus alerts for updates.

ASSISTANCE



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