



Amnesty International

Group 524

June 2021



No June Meeting
Dignity For Detained Immigrants Act
Belarus Journalist Abducted

A Brighter Summer

As we enter this summer with increased vaccinations and easing of pandemic restrictions, there is hope for a return to in-person meetings. Two actions are highlighted this month.

Dignity For Detained Immigrants Act

Congress introduced the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act, which would make detention the exception — not the rule. Details are on page 2 along with our Congressmen and Senators addresses for the model letter on page 3.

Belarus Journalist Faces Torture After Abduction

Exiled Belarusian journalist and government critic, Raman Pratasevich, was unlawfully arrested on May 23, 2021. Details are on page 4 with a model letter to the Embassy on page 5.

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.
Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Belch (joheb@aol.com or 412-766-1894) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA web site (www.amnestyusa.org) and Group 39's Amnesty Pittsburgh web site (www.amnestypgh.org).



Dignity For Detained Immigrants Act

Around 14,000 people are STILL held in U.S. immigration detention. Many are stuck there for weeks, months, even years, without easy access to attorneys and in dangerous, crowded conditions that lack basic hygiene and medical care. Black and brown people, who make up the overwhelming majority of those detained, face added discrimination and other human rights abuses.

Every day immigrants and asylum-seekers remain trapped there is another day their rights are violated and their lives at risk. We have an opportunity to reform the way this system works, and to make freedom the norm:

Congress just introduced the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act which would make detention the exception — not the rule. This transformative legislation would end mandatory detention; eliminate the horrific use of private prison facilities for immigration detention; and protect parents, caregivers, and people who are at-risk from the threat of detention. It would mainstream the use of community-based programs as an alternative to detention and help ensure greater oversight and accountability.

Addresses:

Senator Patrick Toomey
455 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Robert Casey
393 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

Representative Michael Doyle
270 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Conor Lamb
1224 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

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Dear

As your constituent, I write to urge you to support the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act and move it forward for markup and a floor vote.

The Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act sets out a vision and framework for reform, with a dramatic reduction in the use of detention and a shift towards humane and cost-effective strategies that have been demonstrated to work.

The mass detention of immigrants and asylum-seekers is inhumane, poses a danger to the health of individuals and staff in detention, and contravenes the U.S.'s legal and policy commitments with respect to due process, human rights, and racial justice. Black and brown immigrants make up the overwhelming majority of those detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act centers community support alternatives, while ending mandatory detention, restoring due process, eliminating the use of private prison companies and contracts with local and state jails for immigration detention, and protecting parents, caregivers, and people who are at-risk from the threat of detention. It is a significant step toward building greater oversight and accountability to protect the human rights of immigrants and asylum-seekers.

The time for Congress to act is now. There are approximately 14,000 people in immigration detention: a significant number, but far below ICE's overall capacity, and the lowest number of individuals in detention in many years. It is past time to end the horrors of our current system and the harm it inflicts.

I urge you to support the passage of the Dignity for Detained Immigrants Act to protect the human rights of immigrants and asylum-seekers.

Sincerely,



JOURNALIST FACING TORTURE AFTER ABDUCTION

Exiled Belarusian journalist and government critic, Raman Pratasevich, was unlawfully arrested on May 23, 2021 by the Belarusian authorities along with his partner Sofia Sapega, a Russian national. Their Athens-Vilnius flight was diverted and forced to land in Minsk under false pretext. Raman Pratasevich was wanted by the Belarusian authorities on trumped-up “terrorism” charges solely for his journalistic work. If convicted, Raman Pratasevich is facing up to 20 years’ imprisonment. A televised “confession” may indicate torture and other ill-treatment.

Since 2019, Raman Pratasevich had been living outside Belarus out of fear for his safety. On November 5, 2020, he was charged with "organization of mass disorder", "organization of group actions that severely violate public order" and "inciting hatred towards social groups" (these “groups” being police officers and government officials). On November 19, he was put on the country's official "List of Terrorists" becoming the first Belarusian citizen included on the list.

On May 23, 2021, Raman Pratasevich was travelling to Vilnius from Athens with his partner Sofia Sapega. When their RyanAir flight was flying over Belarus, it was diverted by Belarusian air traffic controllers and ordered to land in Minsk Airport, ostensibly due to a report of a bomb on board. A fighter jet belonging to the Belarusian Air Forces was deployed “to accompany” the civilian aircraft to Minsk. After landing, Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega were detained by the Belarusian security services, while their Ryanair flight was allowed to proceed to Vilnius, some five hours later.

If convicted, Pratasevich is facing up to 20 years' imprisonment. He is also at serious risk of torture and other ill-treatment. Charges against Sofia Sapega, who is a Russian citizen and a student at the European Humanitarian University in Vilnius, are unknown. On May 24, pro-government media issued a video depicting Raman Pratasevich in a room with his face swollen and with what looks like a bruise on his forehead. Such video “confessions” extracted under torture and other ill-treatment or duress have been repeatedly used by the Belarusian authorities to intimidate their opponents and discredit detainees. Torture and other ill-treatment have been widespread in Belarus against detained opponents of Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who claims to have won the August 2020 elections. The number of individuals prosecuted under criminal charges as part of the authorities’ crackdown on peaceful dissent is constantly growing.

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Ambassador Dmitry Basik
Embassy of Belarus
1619 New Hampshire Ave NW
Washington, DC 20009

Dear Prosecutor General,

I am writing to demand the immediate release of **Raman Pratasevich** and **Sofia Sapega**, arrested on May 23, 2021 after their Athens-Vilnius flight was forcibly diverted by the Belarusian authorities to Minsk under false pretext. Raman Pratasevich was charged under Articles 293(1) (“Organization of mass disorders”), 342(1) (“Organization or active participation in group actions that severely violate public order”) and 130(3) (“Incitement of racial, ethnic, religious or other social hatred or enmity”) of the Criminal Code. The grounds for Sofia Sapega’s arrest have not been disclosed. It appears that they have been detained in retaliation for Raman Pratasevich’s critical journalistic work.

There is no evidence that Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega have committed an internationally recognized crime, and their detention is arbitrary. Their arrest was conducted in an unlawful and reckless manner, putting all passengers of the plane at risk when a Belarusian Air Force fighter jet diverted their flight and escorted it to Minsk.

On May 24, 2021, Belarusian state television broadcast Raman Pratasevich’s self-incriminating statement in front of a camera with clear bruises on his face. I am concerned that this “confession” may have been extracted by force. Amnesty International has documented widespread use of torture and other ill-treatment in Belarus, violations of the right to a fair trial, and arbitrary prosecution of peaceful protesters and independent journalists in Belarus.

In light of the above, I urge you to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Raman Pratasevich, Sofia Sapega and all those who have been arbitrarily detained and imprisoned in Belarus under trumped-up politically motivated charges in retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly;
- Take immediate steps to protect Raman Pratasevich and Sofia Sapega from torture and other ill-treatment, including by launching an effective investigation into credible allegations of torture, and ensuring they have immediate, unimpeded and confidential access to a lawyer of their choice.

Sincerely,