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BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH

December 20, 2010

Belarus Police Arrest Opposition Leaders

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

MINSK, Belarus — The government of President [Aleksandr G. Lukashenko](#) on Monday carried out a sweeping crackdown on opposition leaders and their supporters, making arrests that drew scathing condemnations from Western governments and seemed to imperil recent efforts to improve relations.

By late in the day, at least six of the nine opposition candidates who ran against Mr. Lukashenko in elections on Sunday were under arrest. The arrests followed an attempt by opposition supporters to storm the main government headquarters here in a futile effort to block the suspiciously lopsided re-election of Mr. Lukashenko, one of the world's most authoritarian presidents.

Mr. Lukashenko said at a news conference that more than 600 others had been detained. With so many arrests, few expected a continuation of the protests on Monday as some had wished. Throughout the day the streets of Minsk were largely quiet, blanketed in a heavy snow.

Western officials expressed particular concern over the treatment of Vladimir Neklyaev, a leading opposition candidate, who was savagely beaten Sunday night, and later taken by unidentified men from the hospital where he was being treated.

“At this moment, I do not know where my husband is located and who forcefully took him away,” Mr. Neklyaev’s wife, Olga, said in a tearful appeal at a news conference with members of an election monitoring mission from the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#). Later, Mr. Lukashenko told reporters that Mr. Neklyaev was being held in a detention center.

Western monitors offered a [harsh assessment](#) of Sunday’s elections, which Mr. Lukashenko officially won with just under 80 percent of the vote. The monitors highlighted apparent fraud in the vote tally and strongly condemned police violence on Sunday night.

“Violent attacks and subsequent arrests of most of the presidential candidates, as well as hundreds of activists, journalists and civil society representatives is the backdrop against which these elections will now be judged,” said Tony Lloyd, the leader of one of the O.S.C.E. monitoring missions in [Belarus](#). “I have to call upon the authorities to clarify the whereabouts, the condition and the future of all those arrested.”

Given the overall atmosphere in the country on voting day, Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, who led another

O.S.C.E. monitoring group, said, “A positive assessment of these elections is impossible.”

Mr. Lukashenko, who has led this former Soviet republic for 16 years and is often referred to as Europe’s last dictator, responded with what appeared to a mix of irritation and bewilderment.

“We did just as you demanded. What complaints could you have?” he said, speaking about the Western assessments. “Openness and transparency were so high that people mistook these elections for a reality show.”

Mr. Lukashenko did make a concerted effort to give these elections at least the **appearance of legitimacy**. He allowed just about anyone to register as a candidate and permitted campaigning more or less freely around the country, a novelty here. For the first time candidates participated in televised debates in which they criticized the president.

Western observers did note the improvements, though they said these were largely undermined by infractions committed on Election Day.

The assessment could harm efforts by Western governments and Belarus to improve their often-strained relations. The foreign ministers of Germany and Poland had offered Mr. Lukashenko about \$3.5 billion in aid on condition that this election be deemed free and fair.

One Monday, officials in both Germany and Poland joined a vocal chorus of condemnation that included several other **European Union** countries, as well as the United States, which has not had an ambassador in Minsk since 2008. The White House said in a statement that Sunday’s violence represented “a clear step backwards on issues central to our relationship with Belarus.”

A modicum of support came from the Kremlin, which in recent months has publicly **clashed** with Mr. Lukashenko. Russia’s president, **Dmitri A. Medvedev**, called the elections “an internal affair” and pledged Russia’s support.

“I hope that with the results of these elections, Belarus will be a modern country, and continue its development as a modern country based on democracy and friendship with its neighbors,” Mr. Medvedev said.