

Belarus opposition condemn jailed activist interview

Opposition decries 'hostage' video as Belarus airs confession of detained journalist

● European powers slam interview

AFP | Minsk

Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya on yesterday dismissed an interview shown on state television in Belarus with a journalist arrested after his plane was forced to land in Minsk.

Germany also slammed the interview with Roman Protasevich as a "disgrace", while British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said he was "clearly under duress".

Speaking during a visit to Warsaw, Tikhonovskaya said: "All such videos are shot under pressure."

"We should not believe any of the words of these people, including Roman Protasevich," said Tikhonovskaya, who ran against Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko in an election last year.

"They are done after torture," she said, adding: "The task of political prisoners is to survive".

Protasevich was arrested on May 23 along with his girlfriend Sofia Sapega when their Ryanair flight from Athens to Vilnius was diverted, intercepted by a Belarusian fighter jet and made



Belarus police detain journalist Roman Protasevich in Minsk (file photo) to land.

The interview with Protasevich, the co-founder and former editor of opposition Telegram channel Nexta which galvanised anti-government demonstrations, was broadcast on Thursday.

Looking uncomfortable in the video, Protasevich said he had called for protests last year and praised Lukashenko.

His supporters said he appeared to have marks on his wrists.

At the end of the 1.5-hour interview broadcast by Belarus state-run channel ONT Thursday evening, Protasevich began crying and covered his face with his hands.

The 26-year-old's father, Dmitry Protasevich, told AFP on Thursday that the video was

the result of "abuse, torture and threats."

"I know my son very well and I believe that he would never say such things," he told AFP.

"They broke him and forced him to say what was needed," he said, adding it pained him to watch the interview.

"I am very worried." Belarusian authorities accuse Protasevich of organising mass riots, a charge that could land him in prison for 15 years.

'Contempt for democracy'

Raab called the interview with Protasevich "disturbing".

"Those involved in the filming, coercion and direction of the interview must be held accountable," he said on Twitter.

In Germany, government spokesman Steffen Seibert said

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that Protasevich's supposed confession was "absolutely disgraceful and implausible".

He accused Belarusian authorities of "mentally and possibly physically" pressuring him to speak.

"That is a disgrace for the broadcaster showing (the interview) and for the Belarusian leadership which is once again showing its contempt for democracy and, it must be said, for humanity," Seibert said.

Protasevich and Sapega are accused of helping to coordinate historic demonstrations that broke out following Lukashenko's disputed re-election last August.

In response to the protests, Belarus authorities waged a brutal crackdown on the opposition and civil society, detaining and imprisoning thousands of demonstrators and pushing opposition leaders into exile.

Rohingya refugee boat lands in Indonesia after 113-day voyage



Rohingya refugees sit on a makeshift boat as they get interrogated by the Bangladesh Border Guard

AFP | Yangon

A boat carrying dozens of Rohingya refugees that set sail in February but had been adrift in the Andaman Sea with engine failure has landed on an Indonesian island after a voyage of more than 100 days, a human rights official said yesterday.

The vessel sailed on Feb. 11 from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh carrying 90 Rohingya refugees, most of them women and children, with the hope of reaching Malaysia.

But the boat's engine failed four days after leaving Cox's Bazar, where refugee camps house hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims who have fled neighbouring Myanmar.

"We have learnt that the 81 (refugees) were fine, they landed on Idaman Island in Aceh (Indonesia)," said Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, a group that monitors the Rohingya crisis.

"They are not 100% safe there yet. We hope they will not be pushed back," Lewa

YOU KNOW WHAT
The Rohingya are a minority group, most of whom are denied citizenship by Buddhist-majority Myanmar, which considers them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh

Of the 90 people who set out on the voyage, eight were found dead by Indian Coast Guards who had tracked and later repaired the vessel in February.

Indian authorities provided food and essential supplies to survivors but refused to let them set foot on their shores. Bangladesh, too, denied re-entry to 81 survivors.

New Israel finance minister to bring more Orthodox Jews into workforce



Ultra-Orthodox Jews take part in the "Mayim Shelanu" ceremony to collect water from a natural spring, near Jerusalem

Reuters | Tel Aviv

Israel's likely new finance minister, Avigdor Lieberman, said on Thursday that economic growth and raising the number of ultra-Orthodox Jews in the workforce would be his main goals.

Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beitenu and seven other parties reached a coalition agreement on Wednesday night that would unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu if it is ratified by parliament.

"This coalition will focus mainly on economic issues," Lieberman, a former defence minister, told Israel's Channel 13.

He said one major challenge would be to bring Israel's "unreasonable" budget deficit under control.

Another was to bring ultra-Orthodox men into the

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AVIGDOR LIEBERMAN

labour force - currently only around half of them work, the others are devoted full-time to religious studies and rely on government allowances and handouts from donors.

"We will do everything to provide them an education and enable them to learn a profession and stand on their own two feet, as opposed to charity and all the stipends," he said.

Arctic sea ice thinning faster than expected, new study shows

AFP | London

Sea ice in the Arctic's coastal regions may be thinning up to twice as fast as previously thought, according to a new study, with worrying implications for climate change.

The analysis, led by researchers at Britain's University College London (UCL), concluded the ice in the coastal regions was thinning at a rate 70 to 100 percent faster than the established consensus.

The dramatic reassessment comes after the team used more up-to-date maps of snow depth on the ice, which has been retreating for decades as the planet warms.

"We believe our new calculations are a major step forward in terms of more accurately interpreting the data we have from satellites," said UCL professor Julienne Stroeve, who co-authored the study published in The Cryosphere journal.

"We hope this work can be used to better assess the performance of climate models that forecast the effects of long-term climate change in the Arctic," she said.

The region, home to millions of square kilometres of ice essential for keeping the planet cool, is warming at three times the global rate, Stroeve said.

Sea ice thickness is estimated by measuring the height of the ice above the water. But that measurement is distorted by snow weighing the ice floes down.

Scientists had adjusted for this using a map of snow depth



A polar bear jumps to an iceberg in the Arctic

in the Arctic that UCL said did not account for the impact of climate change.

"Previous calculations of sea ice thickness are based on a snow map last updated 20 years ago," said Robbie Mallett, a PhD student who led the study.

"Because sea ice has begun forming later and later in the year, the snow on top has less time to accumulate.

"Our calculations account for this declining snow depth for the first time, and suggest the sea ice is thinning faster than we thought."

Global tensions

The researchers used a European Space Agency satellite to time how long it takes for radar waves to bounce back from the ice, allowing them to calculate its height above the water and infer the ice's total thickness.

The UCL team complemented that estimate with a new snow model developed in partnership with Colorado State University in the United States.

It calculates snow depth and density using inputs such as air temperature, snowfall and ice motion data, to track how much snow accumulates on sea ice as it moves around the Arctic Ocean.

The combined results allowed the scientists to gauge the overall rate of decline in ice thickness, as well as its variability from year to year.

Mallett noted sea ice thickness from across the region is crucial because it is "a sensitive indicator of the health of the Arctic".

Thicker ice acts as an insulating blanket, stopping the ocean from warming up the atmosphere in winter, and protecting

BETTER YOU KNOW
Thicker ice acts as an insulating blanket, stopping the ocean from warming up the atmosphere in winter, and protecting the ocean from the sunshine in summer. Thinner ice is less likely to survive during the Arctic summer melt

the ocean from the sunshine in summer, he said.

"Thinner ice is also less likely to survive during the Arctic summer melt."

The UCL study follows a report last month by the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme warning of an increased risk of the region's sea ice disappearing completely in summer, before reforming in winter.

The retreat of the ice is fueling geopolitical tensions as countries eye the polar north's untapped resources and the potential for new maritime routes.

Last month, Arctic countries including the United States and Russia pledged to fight climate change and to preserve peace in the region as its strategic importance rises.