



# International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Distr.: General  
26 August 2024

Original: English

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## Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 113th session

### Summary record of the 3096th meeting

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Friday, 16 August 2024, at 10 a.m.

*Chair:* Mr. Balcerzak

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*Combined twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth periodic reports of Belarus (continued)*

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*The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.*

**Consideration of reports, comments and information submitted by States parties under article 9 of the Convention** *(continued)*

*Combined twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth periodic reports of Belarus (continued)*  
([CERD/C/BLR/24-25](#); [CERD/C/BLR/Q/24-25](#))

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Belarus joined the meeting.*
2. **Ms. Esseneme** (Country Rapporteur) said that she would like to know what criteria and procedures were used by the commission established by the Ministry of Information to detect potentially extremist content and what legal remedies were available to owners of such content. Clarification would be welcome as to whether there were overlapping provisions relating to terrorism and inciting racial hatred in the Criminal Code, the Counter-Terrorism Act of 3 January 2002, as amended in 2012, and the Anti-Extremism Act of 4 January 2007, as amended in 2021, and whether the State party's legal system allowed a distinction to be made between racism and terrorism and between racism and extremism.
3. The Committee wished to learn whether an investigation had been conducted into the excessive use of force by police officers during the demonstrations that had followed the 2020 presidential election and, in particular, whether the perpetrators had been sanctioned and compensation awarded to victims or their dependents. It would also like to hear how the State party ensured that the persons arrested during those demonstrations enjoyed fair trial guarantees and were treated in line with international standards. She would welcome an explanation of the legal framework governing the use of closed proceedings in the State party and the justification for their excessive use in cases of extremism and inciting racial hatred.
4. It would be useful to know what investigative procedure was followed by the body tasked with investigating the post-election violence, which had rejected all complaints of excessive use of force and ill-treatment; whether it adhered to the adversarial principle; what remedies existed to allow victims to have their cases re-examined and obtain reparations; and how the State party prevented and suppressed the excessive use of force by law enforcement officers. She also wished to know what measures had been adopted or were planned to enable human rights defenders to carry out their activities freely and bring an end to the persecution, arrest and arbitrary detention of persons who expressed dissenting opinions.
5. She would appreciate more detailed information on the role of lay judges and on legal provisions guaranteeing the independence of judges and lay judges in relation to their appointment, the suspension and termination of their powers and their inviolability. Furthermore, she wished to know how the granting to the National Assembly of the power to appoint and remove the president, vice-presidents and judges of the Supreme Court upheld the independence of the judiciary and for what reasons Supreme Court judges could be removed. It would be interesting to know whether judges, prosecutors and other judicial officials were required to speak both the State party's official languages, what the working languages of the courts were and whether interpretation into other languages, particularly those spoken by national minorities, was available.
6. An update would be welcome on developments relating to legal assistance, particularly in terms of its scope and the conditions to be met by persons requesting it, along with statistics on those who had benefited from it during the reporting period, including the number of foreigners and of members of national minorities. She would also appreciate data on the prison population, disaggregated by ethnicity and by the crime committed.
7. She would like to receive statistics, disaggregated by nationality and ethnicity, on the number of cases of trafficking in persons that had given rise to investigations, prosecutions and sanctions, as well as the compensation awarded to victims. Specifically, she wished to know what legal and administrative action had been taken in the cases of the 401 victims of trafficking identified between 2017 and 2019, what assistance had been provided to them and what their nationalities and ethnicities were.
8. **A representative of Belarus** said that, under the Constitution, discrimination was prohibited and complaints, either individual or collective, could be submitted to Government agencies; the agencies concerned were then required to provide a substantive response within

a set timeframe, or written justification of their failure to do so. The Constitution also guaranteed protection of the rights of all persons, including from racial discrimination, via competent, independent and impartial courts of general jurisdiction and constitutional courts, which ruled on alleged breaches of constitutional law if all other forms of protection had been exhausted. The courts could consider decisions, actions or inaction by government officials or entities that violated rights. Individuals whose rights had been violated could seek redress for damages. All persons enjoyed the right to legal assistance from legal counsel, court representatives, State bodies and other entities, subject to specific rules.

9. **A representative of Belarus** said that the Constitution prohibited interference in the activities of judges and lay judges, who were subject only to the law. The punishments for exerting pressure on judges or lay judges with the aim of obstructing consideration of a case or obtaining an unlawful decision were set out in the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offences. To ensure their independence, judges were appointed and their terms extended by decision of a single dedicated judicial body, which could also impose disciplinary measures. The power to appoint and remove presidents, vice-presidents and judges of the Supreme Court had been granted to the National Assembly via a constitutional referendum. Further guarantees relating to their terms, which lasted five years but could be renewed indefinitely, were enshrined in the Code of Administrative Procedure and Enforcement. The age limit was 70 years for Supreme Court judges and 65 years for judges in courts of general jurisdiction. Judges could not be transferred to other courts or positions against their will, and their powers could be suspended or terminated only in accordance with the Code on the Judicial System and the Status of Judges.

10. A range of individuals, including persons who had been convicted by the courts, elected officials, managers in government bodies, police officers, lawyers and religious officials, were barred from becoming lay judges. Parties to legal proceedings could opt for their cases to be heard in either Russian or Belarusian, and interpretation was provided for other languages. State-funded legal assistance was available to a large number of persons, including foreigners, at the discretion of the Bar. A code of ethics for lawyers prohibited them from refusing to provide legal assistance without justification, and the Ministry of Justice had received no complaints of such refusals on grounds of race.

11. **A representative of Belarus** said that five national programmes to combat trafficking in persons had been implemented to date, with the active involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The main focus of the programmes was prevention through, for example, a telephone hotline and awareness-raising campaigns, while effort was also made to rehabilitate victims, improve legislation, coordinate activities, facilitate international cooperation and gather statistics. In line with the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, to which Belarus had become a party in 2014, victims of trafficking or the threat of trafficking were accorded a recovery and reflection period of 30 days within which to lodge a criminal complaint. Various legal provisions criminalized trafficking and covered, inter alia, modern slavery, abduction and sexual and labour exploitation. The maximum punishment was 15 years' imprisonment with confiscation of property, the more severe sentences being handed down where the victim was a minor. Judges could award compensation to victims, who were treated equally by the law, regardless of nationality or gender.

12. A mechanism for the identification and rehabilitation of victims of trafficking had been established under the 2012 Trafficking in Persons Act. Victims could be identified by State agencies, but also by international organizations and NGOs. As the law enforcement services were the only State agencies with access to relevant databases and the ability to conduct searches and make enquiries through the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL), other bodies, such as the ministries for education, health and employment, had to refer any suspected cases to them. While the Act made a distinction between victims of trafficking and individuals at risk, both groups were entitled to receive free State assistance, which included temporary accommodation, food, legal aid and medical and psychological support. Victims also had access to material support and assistance in finding a job. Child victims could be assigned foster families or placed for adoption. In 2023, a number of cases of trafficking had been heard by the courts, which had awarded compensation ranging from 200,000 to several million Belarusian roubles.

13. **Ms. Esseneme** said that she would like to know on what grounds the National Assembly could dismiss a president or vice-president of the Supreme Court and whether individuals removed from such positions would also lose their role as Supreme Court judges. It would be helpful to receive more information on the duties of lay judges and what steps individuals had to take to become one.

14. **Ms. Stavrinaki** said that she wished to draw attention to the most recent annual report of the Committee against Torture (A/79/44), which contained a summary account of the results of the proceedings of the inquiry on Belarus. That account set out the numerous allegations of torture and ill-treatment received by that Committee, which had led it to conclude that torture was a systematic practice in the State party. She wished to know how many of the victims concerned belonged to ethnic minorities and other groups protected under the Convention and what steps the State party intended to take to address the findings of the Committee against Torture and give effect to its recommendations. What would the State party do to enhance the protection, in law and in practice, of individuals covered by the Convention?

15. **Mr. Yeung Sik Yuen** said that he would welcome further details of any measures taken by the State party to guarantee the independence of the judiciary. It would be helpful to learn, for instance, who was responsible for appointing and dismissing judges and whether a disciplinary board had been established to handle any potential misconduct by them. The delegation might also wish to explain whether there was a mandatory retirement age for judges and describe their working conditions.

16. **Ms. Shepherd** said that she would be interested to hear whether any of the cases of torture detailed in the report by the Committee against Torture had involved racial profiling and whether the State party's authorities were implementing general recommendation No. 36 (2020) of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on preventing and combating racial profiling by law enforcement officials.

17. **A representative of Belarus** said that the selection process for lay judges began with the establishment of a preliminary list of candidates. The preliminary list for the Supreme Court, which was required to have at least two lay judges, was drawn up by the Minsk City Executive Committee. The list for local and administrative courts comprised individuals who had initially been put forward by workers' organizations or the executive bodies of community organizations or had been chosen at random from the electoral register. A report on the candidates was sent to the competent committee, which drew up the preliminary list within 10 days of receipt of the report.

18. The second stage of the process consisted in the preparation of the final list of lay judges. Once that was done, the committees concerned requested government bodies and other organizations to provide any relevant information on the successful candidates and their activities. That process, the purpose of which was to ensure that there were no obstacles that would prevent the candidates from sitting as lay judges, was carried out in compliance with the Information, Information Systems and Data Protection Act. The successful candidates were then asked to confirm whether they wished to be included in the final list, which was sent to the relevant courts and remained valid for five years.

19. Boards had been established to ensure that judges abided by the highest standards of conduct and upheld the principle of independence. Such bodies, which were composed of judges elected by their peers, were responsible for the professional certification of judges and conducted disciplinary proceedings, selected candidates for the roles of president and vice-president of the different courts and gave their opinion on potential appointments, suspensions and dismissals. They were supported by academics, who were invited to sit on the boards to ensure that their work was transparent. Final decisions regarding the appointment and dismissal of judges were made by a separate entity.

20. **A representative of Belarus** said that the demonstrations that had taken place in August 2020 had not been peaceful in nature; there was a wealth of evidence to prove that protestors had committed violent acts and set fire to voting offices. Many police officers had been injured, and some had had to spend months in hospital. Any use of force by the police had been proportionate to the circumstances. While the Government cooperated with the Committee against Torture, it did not agree with the conclusions the Committee had reached

in its latest annual report. All complaints concerning the ill-treatment of civilians following the events of August 2020 had been duly reviewed and investigated. There had been hundreds of instances of lies and slander in relation to the actions of the law enforcement agencies. The complaints of sexual violence, including those that had been outlined on some United Nations websites, had been found to be baseless. Furthermore, the Government had evidence that the complaints submitted to the Committee against Torture were all in the same format, did not include identifiable information about the persons concerned and had all come from the same individuals, who had received funding from abroad with the single aim of discrediting the Belarusian law enforcement services. None of the complaints concerning the alleged use of force by the law enforcement agencies against demonstrators had been found to be pertinent; officers had used the minimum force necessary to deal with the violent nature of the protests. It was, moreover, a well-known fact that one individual had submitted a complaint to international organizations in an attempt to obtain a humanitarian visa for the European Union.

21. There were no such things as summary trials in Belarus. Closed legal proceedings, however, had their basis in legislation; the relevant references would be provided to the Committee in writing.

22. Overall, the Government did not agree with the way in which the events of August 2020 had been portrayed by Western authorities. He thus wished to call on the Committee not to overlook the experience that most Belarusians had had during those events.

23. There was no racial profiling or torture of persons belonging to ethnic minorities in Belarus, for which reason no data existed in that regard. All persons who were serving a term of imprisonment in a strict regime correctional colony were permitted the same number of phone calls and the same access to legal counsel, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity or other characteristics.

24. Regarding implementation of the Committee's general recommendation No. 36 (2020), his Government would welcome an initiative on the part of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to provide technical assistance in that endeavour. In the meantime, the Government was considering if and how it could make use of the recommendation.

25. He wished to clarify that the Government of Belarus had never provided any information to the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus, as it did not recognize that special procedure as a legitimate mechanism. It should be noted that there was no such profession as "human rights defender" in Belarus. Instead, there were mechanisms that allowed the public to access legal assistance on a paid-for or free-of-charge basis – law practices had to provide pro bono legal services to persons on low incomes on certain days each month.

26. The delegation would be pleased to provide written information on the legislation concerning terrorism and that on extremism, including any possible contradictions between the two, if so requested in a recommendation from the Committee.

*The meeting was suspended at 11.30 a.m. and resumed at 11.40 a.m.*

27. **Mr Diaby** (Country Task Force) said that he would like the delegation to comment on reports that entrenched discrimination persisted against the Roma community, which reportedly faced marginalization, high levels of unemployment, low levels of education and a lack of access to social services. While he noted with satisfaction that a presidential decree on the prevention of social dependency had been amended, in particular to remove the payment of a tax by unemployed or underemployed citizens, which had reportedly had a disproportionate impact on minority groups, especially Roma, he wished to know what steps had been taken to improve access by Roma to education, employment and social services. He was concerned that, according to information received by the Committee, Roma persons were refused referrals to medical rehabilitation boards, which thus prevented them from being granted disability status and from being able to access treatment and disability benefits. He wondered what measures were in place to ensure equal access to health services for Roma persons and to enable them to gain access to disability benefits and appropriate care.

28. He would like to know what was being done to address the reported ethnic profiling of the Roma community. In that connection, he would be interested to hear from the delegation on reports that law enforcement officials allegedly entered the homes of Roma persons, often using threats, and took fingerprints and biological samples, such as DNA cheek swabs. It would be useful to have an explanation of the objective of those actions and of the procedures that were in place for persons wishing to file complaints of such treatment or to report ethnic profiling. The delegation might also provide information on the number of such complaints received and on the investigations that had been carried out, including their outcomes and the redress that had been provided to victims.

29. He would be grateful to know what steps the State party had taken towards making the optional declaration under article 14 of the Convention, recognizing the competence of the Committee to receive and consider individual communications, as had been recommended by the Committee in its previous concluding observations (CERD/C/BLR/CO/20-23, para. 35). Lastly, he would be interested to know why the State party had recently withdrawn from the first Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which had the effect of limiting the avenues through which victims of discrimination, including racial discrimination, in Belarus could uphold their rights, and whether it might be willing to reconsider its decision.

30. **Ms. Esseneme** said that she wondered what might account for the fact that, over the years, so many ethnic minority groups – 150, according to the State party’s report (CERD/C/BLR/24-25, para. 27) – had settled in Belarus. She would be interested to know why the use of the Russian language was reportedly so dominant in the public sector, given that, according to the 2019 population census, the Russian minority represented just 7.5 per cent of the population; whether the delegation could comment on reports that persons who spoke or promoted the Belarusian or Polish languages faced discrimination; and what measures were being taken to promote respect for all languages used in Belarus, in particular Belarusian, given that almost 85 per cent of the population was of Belarusian origin. The Committee had received information indicating that very few schools offered teaching in Belarusian – one of the country’s two official languages – or in other minority languages and that several Polish and Lithuanian schools had been closed down. It would be useful to know the reasons underlying the State party’s promotion of teaching in Russian and its implementation of measures that were seemingly aimed at restricting teaching in other national languages or in Polish and Lithuanian. Such measures did not appear to be in accordance with the Ethnic Minorities Act or the Education Code.

31. The Committee had received reports alleging police searches of Polish education centres across Belarus, the harassment and arrest of members of the Union of Poles in Belarus on accusations of incitement to hatred and threats to national security, and the desecration of graves of the Polish minority. She wished to know how the State party ensured the effective implementation of the Ethnic Minorities Act, pursuant to which the restriction of national minority rights and freedoms was prohibited, as was forced assimilation, and what was being done to protect the Polish community, in particular, from persecution.

32. She would like the delegation to comment on reports that persons living with HIV/AIDS continued to face discrimination and stigmatization, including when it came to finding employment. What was the State party doing to address the situation? Did it have a human rights-based plan of action or strategy to combat HIV/AIDS?

33. The Committee had received information indicating that religious minorities faced administrative constraints and that a number of foreign Catholic priests had been expelled from the country. She would be grateful for further information on those points and on how the State party ensured respect for the right to freedom of religion. She would be curious to know why more than 200 NGOs, in particular, associations representing the Polish, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, Roma, Armenian and Syrian minorities, had reportedly been shut down; what avenues for recourse were open to those organizations; and whether the State party might be willing to reconsider its position, on a case-by-case basis. It would likewise be helpful to have information on the closure by a Hrodna court of two Lithuanian ethnocultural associations.

34. She would appreciate the delegation's comments on the reported cancellation or prohibition of a number of ethnic minority cultural events. For example, according to other sources of information, events commemorating the ninetieth birthday of the Polish writer and journalist Ryszard Kapuściński had been cancelled and a blacklist of artists, including a number of Ukrainian musicians, had allegedly been drawn up; at the same time, works by Russian artists had apparently been promoted. It would be interesting to know how those alleged measures could be considered to be in compliance with the country's Culture Code.

35. Lastly, according to the Belarus Human Rights Index, there had been a significant deterioration since 2019 in the enjoyment of a number of rights, including the right to take part in cultural life. She wondered if the delegation could explain why that might be the case and whether the State party envisaged taking any measures to preserve and promote all cultural traditions in Belarus.

36. **A representative of Belarus** said that members of the Roma diaspora took part in cultural events held in Belarus, including in a biennial festival of national cultures, thereby contributing significantly to public life. At the initiative of the Roma diaspora, a book had been published, with support from the Government, on the Roma genocide during the Second World War, and a service to commemorate all victims of the Nazi concentration camps had been held by the Orthodox Church. The head of the Belarusian Roma Diaspora association was also the head of the Inter-Ethnic Advisory Council and participated in that body's decision-making.

37. There were examples of cooperation between the Roma diaspora and NGOs and of the dissemination of information on Roma history and culture. There was no evidence to suggest that Roma living in Belarus had faced restrictions on their rights, such as to housing, education and other basic services, on the basis of their ethnicity. Roma had the same rights and access to employment and health care as other persons in Belarus, provided that they had the necessary documentation. Specific measures had been taken to integrate Roma children to ensure that they gained an education. The Ministry of Education had not received any reports to suggest any intolerance towards or mistreatment of Roma children by teachers.

38. **A representative of Belarus** said that the Roma community continued to live in Belarus, albeit in low numbers, often pursuing a different lifestyle to that led by the majority of the population. Regrettably, despite the endeavours of social protection agencies, a small proportion of the Roma community did not have identity documents and, thus, in the eyes of the State, did not exist. Every effort had been made to explain to such persons that they needed to be registered to be able to enjoy the rights and benefits accorded to all citizens, non-citizens and temporary or permanent foreign residents. Regarding education, measures had been taken not only to encourage Roma children to go to school but also to provide them with additional lessons in Russian and Belarusian to enable them to progress in life. Those measures were beginning to bear fruit, as shown by the increase in the number of Roma persons completing their education over the past decade.

39. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police were in contact with Roma persons and members of other ethnic groups for purely functional purposes that had nothing to do with ethnic profiling. There were, for example, families that had several children who shared one passport. There was an obvious need for fingerprinting and biological samples to determine the situation in such cases in order to facilitate Roma integration and ensure that Roma children were able to gain an education and enjoy all the benefits of living in a highly developed country.

40. He could not agree with Mr. Diaby's characterization of the tax that had allegedly been imposed pursuant to the first version of the Presidential Decree No. 3 of 2015 on the prevention of social dependency, which had been amended in 2018 and enacted as the Presidential Decree on the promotion of employment. In Belarus, there was no system by which households contributed to the social welfare needs of the population, such as to provide access to medication or unemployment benefits, as was done in other countries. The intention had therefore been to introduce an approach akin to a social protection insurance; its implementation in practice had led to the Government amending the Presidential Decree in order to promote employment. Overall, the aim had been to ensure that the proportion of the population that paid direct taxes did not shoulder a disproportionate burden.

41. The decision had been taken to withdraw from the first Optional Protocol of the International Covenant owing to a long-standing disagreement with the Human Rights Committee with regard to its practice of accepting complaints from citizens of Belarus who had not exhausted all domestic remedies. Furthermore, a number of complaints seemed to have been filed by the same individuals – who were in receipt of foreign funding – and were quite obviously “cut-and-paste” submissions. As it had not been possible to reach a compromise with the Human Rights Committee, the Government had made the decision to withdraw from the Optional Protocol.

42. Russian and Belarusian were the official languages of Belarus and were protected by the Constitution. An overwhelming proportion of the population spoke Russian, but all children in Belarus, without exception, were taught both languages at school, meaning that everyone could – and should – understand both languages. While there was not really a high demand for Belarusian, there was no discrimination against persons who chose to use Belarusian over Russian. Libraries stocked books in both languages and members of the civil service had to be able to use both languages. However, it was not appropriate to artificially maintain interest in one language over another.

43. The change in the approach to teaching in national minority languages reflected the fact that there were two official languages and that they needed to be taught on a mandatory and non-discriminatory basis. Furthermore, the Government was building a single society of Belarusians that comprised all citizens, including those belonging to the 150 ethnic groups living in the country.

44. The attempted coup of 2020 had, to a large extent, been inspired by the influence of NGOs. The objective, on paper, of many such organizations had been to protect the rights or promote the culture of national minorities; in practice, however, they had engaged in political activities in exchange for funding from abroad. That was the reason for the introduction of legislative amendments banning any organizations except political parties from engaging in political activities; some NGOs had also been closed down. In rare cases, the Government had restricted or prohibited cultural or religious events on the same grounds.

45. In Belarus, the most practised religion was Orthodox Christianity, followed by Catholicism. Historically, most Catholic priests had been trained abroad, and a few of those who had been sent to work in Belarus had not shown a respectful attitude towards Belarusian society. As a result, the authorities had engaged with the national leadership of the Catholic Church and the papal nuncio to inform them that such people should not be sent to Belarus and that priests should perform their religious duties without promoting political narratives. Some priests had been replaced. The Government maintained a relationship of constructive cooperation with the Pope and his representatives.

46. **Mr. Diaby** said that he still wished to learn why law enforcement officers went to the homes of persons of Roma origin and took their fingerprints and DNA samples, which seemed to be an example of racial profiling, and whether there was a mechanism by which complaints could be submitted in such cases.

47. **Ms. Esseneme** said that she would appreciate information concerning the stigmatization of persons living with HIV/AIDS and discrimination against them in the workplace.

48. **Ms. Shepherd**, welcoming the strategies adopted by the State party to promote inter-ethnic peace, said she would be interested to know which strategy had been most effective. She wondered whether schools taught human rights education, particularly at the secondary level.

49. **Mr. Gwalawala Sibande** said that he was concerned about restrictions imposed on journalists, NGOs and religious organizations that voiced criticism of the Government and would be grateful if the delegation could confirm that steps would be taken to improve the situation.

50. **Ms. Tlakula** (Follow-up Coordinator) said that, in its previous concluding observations ([CERD/C/BLR/CO/20-23](#)), the Committee had expressed concern that Presidential Decree No. 3 of 2015 required individuals who worked fewer than 183 days per year to pay approximately \$250 per year in compensation for lost tax revenues, a requirement



that disproportionately affected Roma persons. She would be grateful if the delegation could confirm that the provisions in question had been repealed in all cases, including for Roma, in accordance with the Committee's recommendation.

51. **Ms. Tebie** said that she wished to know what steps the State party had taken to give effect to the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action, whether they included the adoption of a national action plan and, if so, what results had been achieved.

52. **A representative of Belarus** said that human rights standards were by nature complex and he knew of no country that upheld them fully. The Government was doing its utmost with the resources at its disposal. Belarus did not have any legislative acts that permitted discrimination or racial profiling. All laws, including Presidential Decree No. 3, applied equally to all citizens and residents.

53. The most effective strategy for promoting inter-ethnic peace was to ensure the development of all ethnic minorities. Most of the many ethnic groups in the country were, like Belarusians, of central European, Slav origin, which imparted a general unity to the country. Belarus was an industrialized country with a high level of human development, a highly educated population and a tradition of excellence in engineering, mathematics and information and communication technology. Higher education was open to all. The President and his team were working to meet the needs of the population through a long-term development strategy.

54. Belarus actively supported the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action at the international level, including as a sponsor of resolutions within the United Nations system. The approaches outlined those documents were reflected in the country's laws on development, religion and ethnic relations and its national programme for the development of the religious sphere, ethnic relations and cooperation with Belarusians abroad, which was renewed every five years.

55. Approximately 20,000 people in Belarus were living with HIV/AIDS; most of them were receiving antiretroviral therapy and were able to lead normal lives. Anyone who had been overlooked for a job on the grounds of their HIV status could assert their rights before the courts. The Labour Code contained specific provisions that prohibited the rejection of job candidates for reasons unrelated to their skills.

56. Statistics on the prison population, disaggregated by sex, could be provided to the Committee in writing, although figures disaggregated by nationality or ethnic group were unavailable.

57. **A representative of Belarus** said that 1,013 persons had been granted refugee status since the relevant legislation came into force in 1997. They included 647 Afghan nationals, 136 Georgians, 38 Syrians, 33 Tajiks, 30 Azerbaijanis, 23 Ethiopians and smaller numbers of other nationalities. Of the further 7,348 persons who had been granted subsidiary protection, about 7,000 were Ukrainian. The State recognized the importance of working with refugees and protected persons to create favourable conditions for their integration into Belarusian society. Citizenship had been awarded to 267 former refugees.

58. **A representative of Belarus** said that the allegation that burial sites linked to Polish history had been desecrated was untrue. In Hrodna and Brest Provinces, in the years following independence, some unofficial signs had been erected to commemorate certain historical events. The signs had been installed without due attention by the authorities, and appropriate measures had since been taken to remove or regularize them.

59. **Ms. Esseneme** said that she appreciated the calm manner in which the delegation had approached the dialogue, in spite of the difficult circumstances. She looked forward to receiving written responses to all unanswered questions.

60. **A representative of Belarus**, thanking the experts for the constructive dialogue and for their interest in his country, said that racism was rare in Belarusian society, to the extent that many citizens did not encounter it or view it as a significant problem. The State pursued a development model designed to reach every single person, leaving no one behind, deploying the resources and instruments at its disposal. Civil society organizations were

active and effective partners in delivering social programmes in support of ethnic and religious minorities, thereby contributing to social harmony.

*The meeting rose at 1 p.m.*