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# BELARUS

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## Republic of Belarus

**Population:** 9.9 million (2.2 million under 18)

**Government armed forces:** 72,940

**Compulsory recruitment age:** 18

**Voluntary recruitment age:** 17

**Voting age:** 18

**Optional Protocol:** not signed

**Other treaties ratified** (see glossary):

CRC, GC AP I and II, ILO 138, ILO 182

***Seventeen year olds entering the National Military Academy were given the status of members of the armed forces after an initial induction period. The military school in Minsk admitted children from the age of 12, many of whom go on to military training.***

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## Context

The authorities used repressive measures to stifle peaceful protest and the legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression. Critics of the government, human rights activists, journalists, trade unionists and lawyers faced harassment and intimidation by the authorities. In the first four months of 2002 more than 200 people were detained during anti-government demonstrations, and at least 50 were subsequently imprisoned for between three and 15 days. Such arrests continued throughout the period under review, though on a lesser scale. Death sentences continued to be imposed and carried out but no reliable figures were available because the matter was treated as a state secret.<sup>1</sup>

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## Government

### National recruitment legislation and practice

Volunteers may enter the National Military Academy from 17 years of age. Following a few weeks' induction, their status is "equal to that of a conscript" although they are unlikely to serve in military operations or peacekeeping duties during their five years at the Academy. Professional service in the armed forces generally starts at 20 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

Under the constitution (Article 57) and the Law on Military Duty and Military Service of July 2003, men are liable for conscription from the age of 18 to 27.<sup>3</sup> At 14 they are registered as potential draftees. Conscription is for 18 months, or 12 months for graduates of higher education. College students may defer and exemptions in specified circumstances are permitted.<sup>4</sup> In 2003

there were approximately 30,000 conscripts in the armed forces.<sup>5</sup>

Belarus reported to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that, under its Rights of the Child Act, "children may not be incited to participate in military activities or in armed conflicts, war and violence" or join "armed formations". However, the report also stated that "in wartime, the President of the Republic may lower the age of conscription".<sup>6</sup>

As a supplement to general conscription, from January 2004 a new Law on Reserve Service obliged those selected to undertake military training of up to 800 hours over a three-year period (two years for college graduates) and 250 hours a year subsequently. Participants would not have to leave their jobs.<sup>7</sup> In March 2004 draft legislation to provide alternative national service was still before parliament.

The widespread hazing<sup>8</sup> (*dedovshchina*) of new recruits by physical and demeaning abuse continued to be reported. The authorities took some action against this and in 2002 criminal charges were brought against 15 individuals and disciplinary action was taken against 160. However, investigations by families and human rights groups were blocked by the authorities.<sup>9</sup> Unofficially, at least 27 suicides were reported in the military in 2002.<sup>10</sup>

### Military training and military schools

The Suvorov Military School in Minsk admits children from the age of 12. They live in barracks, wear military uniforms and receive "extended military training" as well as a basic education.<sup>11</sup> Most students go on to the Belarus Military Academy and the "military and educational institutions of the Russian Federation".<sup>12</sup>

Voluntary classes on military history and patriotism are provided in some secondary schools. Students are also offered summer camps on military bases.<sup>13</sup>

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- 1 *Amnesty International Reports 2002, 2003 and 2004*, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/engindex>.
  - 2 Correspondence with Belarusian Defence Attaché to the USA, 3 and 4 March 2004.
  - 3 Constitution, <http://www.president.gov.by> (Republic of Belarus, Constitution).
  - 4 Belarusian Defence Attaché to USA, op. cit.
  - 5 International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2003-2004*, Oxford University Press, October 2003.
  - 6 Report of Belarus to UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/65/Add.15, 26 September 2001, <http://www.ohchr.org>.
  - 7 Belarusian Defence Attaché to USA, op. cit.

- 8 An institutionalized system of extreme physical abuse and psychological humiliation inflicted over an extended period on the most recent or junior conscripts by longer-serving conscripts or senior soldiers. While not formally condoned, lack of supervision allows the practice to continue unchecked. The precise form it takes may vary from one army to another, but its essential features are that it is systematic, continual, status-related, and usually carried out by those who have previously been its victims.
- 9 US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2003*, February 2004, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/c1470.htm>.
- 10 Anastasiya Dorofeeva, "Army brutality claims young lives", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), *Belarus Reporting Service*, 28 March 2003, <http://www.iwpr.net> (Programmes, past programmes).
- 11 Belarusian Defence Attaché to USA, op. cit.
- 12 Ministry of Defence news article, 20 June 2003, [http://www.mod.mil.by/2003june\\_eng.html](http://www.mod.mil.by/2003june_eng.html).
- 13 Belarusian Defence Attaché to USA, op. cit.