

Ecologists Face Cops and Thugs

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Activists putting up barricades last week to prevent loggers from cutting down Khimki's old oak forest.
Misha Japaridze

Environmentalists trying to prevent the destruction of the Khimki forest called the police after 100 masked thugs threatened them with physical violence.

But instead of being rescued, they found themselves placed under arrest for hindering loggers from starting to work on an \$8 billion highway between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Riot police detained 15 environmentalists and two journalists but let the unidentified masked attackers go Friday, the activists said, ending a weeklong standoff in the forest.

“When the police arrived, the men had already reached our camp and were threatening to beat us,” Yevgenia Chirikova, the leader of the activists who was among those detained, told Radio Liberty. “I explained that I was the mother of two young children, that I feared for my life and my safety, that dozens of people came here, and I was afraid they would hurt me.”

She said she tried to force the police to deal with the masked men, but they refused.

"I asked the police officers to stay and check their documents, but they refused and tried to leave," she said.

Calls to Chirikova's cell phone went unanswered Sunday.

The police faulted the activists, saying they had not been in danger but had broken the law by attempting to hinder contractors hired to cut down the trees.

When the police arrived at the campsite, "there was no public disturbance at the scene," Yevgeny Gildeyev, a spokesman for the Moscow region police, said in a statement, Interfax reported.

Gildeyev said the activists ignored "lawful demands" to disperse and had to be detained by riot police.

"A few dozen 'environmentalists' interfered in the work of construction workers and blocked their equipment," he said in a statement. "The employees of the private security company patrolling this site had failed to move those citizens away from the equipment."

The detainees were taken to the Khimki district police station, The Associated Press reported. Several protesters and the two journalists were later released, and no charges against the detained activists were reported Sunday.

It was the second clash between the police and environmentalists, who managed to briefly chase away loggers when the deforestation started July 14.

The environmentalists attempted to stage a rally near the White House in downtown Moscow on Thursday, filing a petition with the government and seeking to present Prime Minister Vladimir Putin with timber from the newly felled trees.

But the rally, which had gathered about 50 people, ended up with several activists being dragged off to the local police station.

Yury Shevchuk, the rock star who openly confronted Putin about a lack of civil freedoms in Russia in May, traveled from St. Petersburg to Moscow on Friday to support the activists but did not take part in Friday's clashes.

"I have come to at least provide some moral support for the guys, to meet them, to understand what is going on and figure out how I can help," Shevchuk told Ekho Moskv radio on Sunday.

The highway project has been a point of contention since the mid-2000s.

Environmentalists say the highway can be built to bypass the old oak forest and that contractors are working without proper permission and by using illegal immigrants. The environmentalists lost a lawsuit in the Supreme Court in April but still claim that the contractors cannot proceed because of paperwork violations.

Inzhservis, the company that was doing the logging work in the Khimki forest, was even taken off the project Wednesday because it failed to meet its deadline. Inzhservis is a subcontractor employed by Teplotekhnika, which got a government contract to clear the forest. Teplotekhnika has worked on the infrastructure of Hotel Ukraina in Moscow and plumbing in Moskva-City.

Alexander Semchenko, CEO of Teplotekhnika, said Thursday that the new logging contractor is Lestorg, which will do its job using machinery, not workers with chainsaws. He said the change should eliminate worries about illegal immigrants involved in the legal procedure of cutting down the trees.

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