The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Khodorkovsky Calls Case 'Utter Rubbish'

October 27, 2010

Khodorkovsky greets reporters from the defendant's cage Wednesday. **Alexander Zemlianichenko**

Jailed oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky said Wednesday that an embezzlement case against him was "utter rubbish" and urged that it be thrown it out as he made an impassioned, three-hour closing statement in his second trial.

"I am sure that you are competent enough to understand that the allegations made by the prosecution are utter rubbish and you are not going to include utter rubbish in your ruling," Khodorkovsky, composed but pale, told Judge Viktor Danilkin.

Khodorkovsky accused the prosecutors of following political orders to keep him and business associate Platon Lebedev behind bars, but said the evidence the prosecutors presented makes clear the two of them are not guilty.

"Please appreciate their [prosecutors'] efforts," he said to the judge with a note of sarcasm. "Otherwise, next time they could just spit on a piece of paper stamped by the prosecutor's office and come to you asking for another 14-year sentence. Nearly the same thing is already happening in this court."

Prosecutors last week requested a 14-year sentence, which lawyers said would include time already served.

Khodorkovsky, 47, was Russia's richest man when he was arrested in 2003 on charges of tax evasion by his now-defunct oil company, Yukos. The charges were considered punishment for challenging then-President Vladimir Putin, including by funding opposition parties.

Khodorkovsky's eight-year sentence from that trial is a year from completion, but the second raft of fraud and embezzlement charges filed against him could keep him behind bars until 2017.

Critics charge that the second case is designed to keep Khodorkovsky incarcerated until after the 2012 presidential election, in which Putin could take part. The case is being closely watched to gauge whether Russia has strengthened its commitment to the rule of law as President Dmitry Medvedev has promised.

Khodorkovsky and Lebedev are accused of stealing more than 218 million tons of oil — worth some $27 billion — produced by Yukos from 1998 to 2003. Khodorkovsky said that if this amount of oil were placed in freight trains, they would circle the equator twice.

Several dozen supporters cheered and chanted "Freedom, freedom!" when court marshals led a handcuffed Khodorkovsky into the courtroom, which was crammed with the defendants' relatives and prominent opposition figures.

Among them was former chess champion Garry Kasparov, who predicted that this "political trial will determine the configuration of the future government in Russia."

Khodorkovsky's 76-year-old father told reporters that he was afraid he would not live to see his son walk free.

"I'm old and I'm scared that I may never see him again because of this trial," Boris Khodorkovsky said.

Closing arguments are scheduled to continue into early next week. The judge is then expected to call a recess before issuing a ruling.

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