

Kremlin Approves Khimki Highway

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The Kremlin has approved an unpopular plan to build a highway through the centuries-old Khimki forest north of Moscow, Vedomosti reported Thursday, saying it was the Kremlin's final decision.

The Moscow-St. Petersburg highway has become a political issue for the Kremlin after a wave of opposition protests last summer. In August, President Dmitry Medvedev suspended it in a decision welcomed by environmentalists.

Vedomosti quoted several unidentified Kremlin sources, including a senior official, as saying construction would go ahead after all. The Kremlin declined to comment Thursday.

Opponents to the project argue the highway could easily be re-routed without damaging pristine woodland. The project has become a rallying point for environmentalists, rights groups and Kremlin critics.

The timing of Medvedev's suspension decision appeared aimed at preventing the issue from snowballing and eroding support for the country's leadership ahead of State Duma elections next year and a 2012 presidential vote.

Three journalists who reported and blogged against the Khimki highway have been attacked over the past two years.

The most severe attack involved Mikhail Beketov, a Khimki newspaper editor who campaigned against the highway and suffered brain damage and had his leg and fingers amputated after an unsolved 2008 beating.

In November, Kommersant journalist Oleg Kashin was attacked by unknown assailants who broke his legs, jaw and fingers and left him in a coma for a week.

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