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Khodorkovsky Lawyers Soldier On

By Alexandra Odynova

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Lawyers for jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky vowed to press ahead on multiple fronts to contest charges against their client on Thursday, while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the case would not deter foreign investors.

Vadim Klyuvgant, the lead defense lawyer, said a court ruling on Dec. 30 that added six years to Khodorkovsky's current sentence on embezzlement and money-laundering charges was a political decision.

"We are completely certain that the judge who announced the verdict was not in fact its author," Klyuvgant told reporters.

Defense lawyer Yury Shmidt said a petition would be filed with the Investigative Committee to open an inquiry into the work of officials involved in the case. But he said he doubted that an inquiry, even if it were opened, would benefit Khodorkovsky, who was jailed for eight years after a first trial in 2005.

“The problem is that the case would be opened by the same people who investigated the affair, or their superiors,” Shmidt said.

Defense lawyers have filed an appeal over the second conviction and will appeal to the European Court of Human Rights if all avenues for recourse are exhausted, Klyuvgant said.

Earlier this week, a group of European Parliament lawmakers headed by Estonia’s Kristiina Ojuland proposed blacklisting unspecified Russian officials connected to the case in response to the verdict.

European Union and U.S. officials have also criticized the ruling, which is widely seen as punishment from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for Khodorkovsky’s political and commercial ambitions.

But Lavrov told reporters Thursday that Western criticism was inappropriate because the case was ongoing and echoed an earlier statement from his ministry that the trial was a domestic issue.

Klyuvgant, however, said “human rights cannot be an internal affair” and added that the case ended when the judge announced the verdict last month.

Lavrov said he expected pragmatic views to prevail in relations between Russia and the West. “I hope that emotions won’t affect the government’s plans to raise Russia’s attractiveness to investors in 2011,” he said.

Lavrov went on to argue that any country’s investment climate depended not on its politics but on its laws. As an example, he said U.S. investors in China remained undeterred despite uneasy political relations between Washington and Beijing.

Lavrov allowed that Russian legislation was “not ideal” but said the government was working constantly to improve it.

Shmidt said Khodorkovsky might face new charges following Putin’s allegations on a televised call-in show last month that Khodorkovsky was involved in murders while running Yukos.

An international arbitration tribunal in Stockholm has identified three reasons that suggest that the crackdown on Yukos was politically motivated, Vedomosti reported Thursday.

The court, in a September ruling, found that the tax evasion schemes that Yukos was accused of using were also implemented by other companies, but those companies have not faced prosecution, the report said.

Also, the manner in which the tax authorities opened inquiries into Yukos indicate that political forces were behind the decision, it said. The third reason was the auction of Yukos subsidiary Yuganskneftegaz to a shady company apparently controlled by Rosneft.

Staff writer Nikolaus von Twickel contributed to this report.

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