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Medvedev Signs Bill Granting Officials, Rights Groups Access to Prisons

By Herbert Mosmuller

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In a bid to step up control over the country's notorious prison system, the Kremlin authorized on Thursday a range of senior officials and rights activists to access detention facilities without special permits.

The bill, signed into law by President Dmitry Medvedev, grants free access to prisons to federal and regional lawmakers, senior bureaucrats, ombudsmen and representatives of Russian and international rights groups, the Kremlin said on its web site.

Previously, rights activists and most officials had to obtain advance permits to visit prisons, giving authorities ample time to prepare for inspections.

The bill did not elaborate on which foreign rights groups it covers, saying only the organizations will be defined based on Russia's international agreements.

Public Chamber member Yelena Lukyanova praised the law, saying it will help oversee the ongoing reform of the country's prisons, known for their poor detention conditions and insufficient health care.

"For the first time in decades, large-scale reforms are being carried out in the penal system. Reforms will be slow, and during the transition period, we need strict control," she said by telephone.

But Eduard Rudek of the Oversight Commission for Human Rights of Prisoners said the legislation alone is not enough to bring change.

"The problem lies with the law's implementation. The laws we have now are also good, but the prisons are bad; the laws are not being implemented," Rudek said.

A former inmate also voiced skepticism on the reforms. "On one hand, it's a positive step because authorities will be forced to react [to criticism by inspectors], but I think the rights of prisoners will still be violated since our system as a whole is not intended to correct the man, but to break him," said the inmate, who asked only to be identified by his last name, Maxim.

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