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Amnesty's Support for Ex-Yukos Owners Irks Moscow

By Alexandra Odynova

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The Foreign Ministry on Wednesday denounced Amnesty International's labeling of former Yukos owners Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Platon Lebedev as prisoners of conscience — a decision that their supporters said should have come after their first jailing seven years ago.

Amnesty, which campaigns for the release of people it has recognized as prisoners of conscience, said it decided that the two businessmen were being prosecuted for their views after the Moscow City Court upheld on Tuesday their December convictions on theft and money-laundering charges.

The court also reduced the prison terms by one year for each. The businessmen, who were first jailed in a tax and fraud trial in 2005, are now to be released in 2016.

"Whatever the rights and wrongs of Khodorkovsky and Lebedev's first convictions, there can no longer be any doubt that their second trial was deeply flawed and politically motivated,"

Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International's director for Europe and Central Asia, said in a statement.

The two trials are widely seen as punishment from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin for Khodorkovsky's political and economical ambitions.

Russian rights activists have asked Amnesty to recognize the businessmen as prisoners of conscience since 2005. But "the political motivation of the case wasn't evident at the time because of the case's economic component," a representative for Amnesty's Russian office, said Wednesday.

But with the second trial, "there was no doubt that the trial was politically motivated due to the amount of violations," she said by telephone. She asked not to be identified, saying she was not authorized to comment on the issue.

Amnesty had asked authorities to overturn the December verdict, and the refusal gave it formal grounds to recognize Khodorkovsky and Lebedev as prisoners of conscience, she said.

Foreign Ministry ombudsman Konstantin Dolgov said Amnesty's decision was "one-sided" and "rests on the organization's conscience," RIA-Novosti reported.

But rights veteran Lyudmila Alexeyeva and Khodorkovsky's lead lawyer, Vadim Klyuvgant, both welcomed the move while rebuking Amnesty for not acting sooner. "Thanks to this respectable organization for making the decision, even if it's some seven years late," Klyuvgant said, Interfax reported.

The term "prisoners of conscience" was introduced by Amnesty in the 1960s and initially applied to Soviet dissidents. It never went out of usage and was last applied in Russia to five opposition activists, among them Boris Nemtsov, Ilya Yashin and Eduard Limonov, when they were briefly jailed after a New Year's Eve rally in support of free assembly in central Moscow.

Yashin said by telephone that the latest decision was well-deserved and would provide "important moral support" for the businessmen.

"Moreover, the status of a prisoner of conscience increases safety in detention, although it can't guarantee it," Yashin said.

A cellmate attacked Khodorkovsky in 2006, slashing his face. He later claimed he was pressured into carrying out the attack by the prison staff.

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