

Retrial Ordered in Altai Poaching Crash

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Three well-connected men accused of poaching endangered sheep during an ill-fated helicopter trip in the Altai mountains will face a retrial, Interfax reported Thursday.

The Altai Supreme Court canceled the acquittal of Moscow entrepreneur Boris Belinsky, State Duma committee adviser Nikolai Kapranov and former senior Altai official Anatoly Bannykh, all of whom were cleared of poaching charges by a lower court in May.

No date for a new trial had been set as of Thursday.

The trio are accused of hunting argali sheep — a sacred animal in Altai — during a 2009 helicopter trip with senior local and federal officials, including the Kremlin's envoy to the Duma, Alexander Kosopkin. The trip ended in a crash that killed Kosopkin and six others. Four people survived.

An inquiry into what happened was dropped soon after the crash but reopened later in 2009 when photographs from the crash site showing slain argali sheep amid the copter's wreckage were published online. Only some 200 argali sheep remain in Russia.

One of the four survivors, a pilot, was not charged. The other three were accused of poaching, which carries a maximum sentence of up to two years, but did not go on trial until the statute of limitations had expired, ensuring that they could not have been given real prison terms.

The three men pleaded not guilty, saying the poaching was done exclusively by those who had died. New legislation passed in July allows investigators to press charges after a suspect dies, but it remained unclear Thursday whether any of the crash victims might face posthumous prosecution.

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