The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Altai Authorities to Pursue VIP Poaching Case Again

By Jonathan Earle

January 12, 2012



Having twice failed in criminal court, authorities in the Siberian republic of Altai will attempt to take the survivors of a VIP party of poachers to civil court, RIA-Novosti reported Thursday.

The decision is a small victory for environmental activists who have pushed for three of the four survivors — entrepreneur Boris Belinsky, State Duma committee adviser Nikolai Kapranov and former senior Altai official Anatoly Bannykh — to be brought to justice, despite repeated setbacks and accusations of prosecutorial favoritism.

The men were allegedly shooting endangered rams from a helicopter when their aircraft crashed in a remote region of the Altai republic in 2009 under murky circumstances, killing seven, including the Kremlin's envoy to the State Duma, Alexander Kosopkin.

In March, a local district court acquitted the three defendants. The region's top court ordered a retrial with a new team of judges, but the case was thrown out in December because

the statute of limitations had expired.

The incident, dubbed "Altaigate" by some English-speaking observers, caused an uproar in Altai and in the environmental community after photographs from the crash site were published that appeared to show the carcasses of endangered argali sheep.

Larisa Vasilyeva, a journalist with the local Altapress.ru news portal who initially published the photographs, said she was not convinced that Altai's wildlife committee would actually file the request or that they would win the case if they did.

"Corrupt republic, corrupt authorities," Vasilyeva said by telephone Thursday.

There has not been another a VIP poaching scandal of equal magnitude since the incident. "The rumor is that after the incident, somebody in the Kremlin made it clear that this kind of scandal wasn't to be repeated, and it hasn't been," said Alexei Vaisman of TRAFFIC, which monitors illegal wildlife trade.

But Oleg Podtyazhkin, a former biologist who now runs Club IBEX, which helps arrange hunting trips to Altai, said lax oversight, not an upsurge of respect for the law, might explain what some have interpreted as a drop in poaching.

"There aren't enough inspectors working in the field," he said, adding that anti-poaching efforts were more robust in Soviet times.

When asked how he responded to requests to hunt illegal animals, Oleg's son Alexei, who also works at the company said, "We say 'no,' immediately."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/12/altai-authorities-to-pursue-vip-poaching-case-again-a11840