

Khodorkovsky Lawyers Deny Report That Tycoon Asked for Olympic Visa Ban

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Khodorkovsky listens behind bars during his trial on fraud charges.

Lawyers for imprisoned tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky denied a report circulating Sunday in the British media that their client sent a letter to the British prime minister urging a visa ban on 308 Russian officials at the London Summer Olympics.

In an interview with Ekho Moskvyy radio, lawyer Yury Schmidt said: "I am absolutely convinced that Khodorkovsky could not compile such a list. It's some kind of intentional error or an overt provocation," Interfax reported.

The Sunday Telegraph said that Khodorkovsky had passed the newspaper a letter via his lawyers that said President Vladimir Putin had the power to push Russia toward democracy but had no impetus without pressure.

"It is the role of other world leaders to spell out the price Russia tragically pays for being semi-detached from the family of modern democratic nations," the paper quoted him as saying.

Khodorkovsky allegedly wrote that preventing the officials from entering Britain would be something the British government could do to "raise the profile of human rights while hosting the Olympic Games."

The list of officials was first presented to the U.S. Congress last year by opposition leader and former world chess champion, Garry Kasparov. It contains Russian officials allegedly involved in human rights violations, including Deputy Prime Minister Vladislav Surkov, Prosecutor General Yury Chaika, former Federal Youth Agency head Vasily Yakemenko, and elections chief Vladimir Churov.

It was unclear how many officials on the list planned to attend London's Olympic Games.

This would not be the first time Yakemenko has been the subject of a ban. In 2010, Estonia barred him from entering the EU's Schengen visa zone, placing him on a blacklist for his work as founder and former leader of the pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi. In 2007, Nashi activists targeted Estonia for relocating a World War II memorial from central Tallinn to a nearby military cemetery.

The Telegraph said Khodorkovsky's move was timed to coincide with the visit of British Foreign Secretary William Hague to Russia on Monday, where the diplomat is expected to speak on the issue of democracy during a trip focused on Syria and Iran.

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