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Ahead of Pussy Riot Verdict, Supporters Ready Protests

By Natalya Krainova

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Police escorting Nadezhda Tolokonnikova to the Khamovnichesky District Court. A verdict in the Pussy Riot trial is scheduled Friday. **Maxim Stulov**

As a Moscow court is set to deliver a highly anticipated verdict Friday in the trial against members of female punk band Pussy Riot, street protests in support of the group are planned in at least 54 cities worldwide.

On Thursday, the judge who is set to deliver the verdict in the case, Marina Syrova, asked Moscow City Court chairwoman Olga Yegorova to provide her with bodyguards due to the "incessant threats" she has been receiving, court spokeswoman Anna Usachyova told Interfax.

Meanwhile, former Beatles singer Paul McCartney voiced hope that authorities will pardon the defendants — Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22; Maria Alyokhina, 24; and Yekaterina Samutsevich, 30 — who have been detained since March and face up to seven years in prison

on charges of hooliganism motivated by religious hatred.

The charges stem from their alleged participation in a February performance at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral that denounced President Vladimir Putin and Russian Orthodox Church head Patriarch Kirill using obscene language.

McCartney, who joins such prominent musicians as Madonna and Bjork in voicing support for the women, posted a short open letter addressed to the defendants on his website Thursday.

Putin hosted McCartney at the Kremlin during his first term as president in 2003. Presidential administration chief of staff Sergei Ivanov has been identified in media reports as being a fan of McCartney.

The three Pussy Riot women deny being motivated by religious hatred, saying they wanted to express their political views, and they insist that they committed not a criminal offense but an administrative one, punishable by a small fine or a jail term of a few days or weeks.

Syrova will start reading the verdict at 3 p.m at the city's Khamovnichesky District Court. Most of the protests will start at 3 p.m. Moscow time as well, Pussy Riot support website Freepussyriot.org reported. There will be protests across Russia, Europe, the United States and Canada, as well as one in Argentina and one in Israel.

Demonstrations are scheduled to be held in Barcelona, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Dublin, Helsinki, London, New York, Paris and Sydney, among other places.

By Thursday evening, 700 people had signed up on Facebook for a rally in Moscow in support of the band. That event is set to be held at 2 p.m. Friday outside the courthouse where the verdict will be announced.

Journalists at the courthouse Friday will be forced to watch the announcement of the verdict from a separate room on a television screen to ensure that everyone receives a seat, Khamovnichesky District Court spokeswoman Daria Lyakh told legal news agency Rapsi on Aug. 9.

At some previous hearings, up to a dozen journalists have been left out of the courtroom due to a lack of seats.

The hearing will also be broadcast live on Rapsi's website, Lyakh said.

Meanwhile, two Novosibirsk residents have sued Pussy Riot for moral damages in connection with their February performance, Interfax reported Thursday, joining another Novosibirsk woman who brought suit against the group.

In response to the earlier suit, local artist Artyom Loskutov said he had sued the law firm defending the plaintiff, seeking 30 kopecks in moral damages from each of three employees of the firm, Loskutov said on his website, Kissmybabushka.com.

Also on Thursday, an unidentified woman picketed outside the Cathedral Mosque in St. Petersburg with a banner reading "Muhammad, stop Putin!"

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