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Izhmash Weapons Factory Will Have to Wait for New Leader

By Irina Filatova

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Izhevsk-based Izhmash is perhaps best known for manufacturing the Kalashnikov assault rifle, but the company also produces motorcycles and cars.

Venerable weapons manufacturer Izhmash is embroiled in an extraordinary public clamor by factory old-timers concerned about management efficiency, while its parent company announced Wednesday that it had postponed a competition to appoint the plant's new director.

State corporation Russian Technologies, which owns Izhmash, said it needed more time to check whether candidates running for the position are qualified to handle the secret information they are likely to deal with while working for a defense company.

"The competition wasn't canceled. ... A decision has been made to postpone it to a different date," Russian Technologies deputy chief executive Alexei Alyoshin said in a statement.

He added that the choice, initially scheduled for Nov. 12, might be made at the end of this year or in early 2013.

The Izhmash factory,1,200 kilometers east of Moscow in Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurtia Republic, was founded in 1807 and is noted for being the manufacturing base of the world-famous Kalashnikov assault rifle.

The announcement came amid claims by plant veterans that Izhmash is struggling as a result of ineffective management.

A group of 17 long-serving employees, including 92-year-old rifle designer Mikhail Kalashnikov, sent a letter to President Vladimir Putin late last month complaining about a dramatic decline in output that is likely to result in the plant failing to fulfill state orders for certain weapons.

As a result of meager salaries, the factory is facing a dramatic outflow of qualified staff, since workers' monthly salaries barely reach 10,000 rubles ($312), the letter said.

"Many earn even less," the letter stated, RIA-Novosti reported.

The petition's authors couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday, but Yury Turygin, executive director of the Union of Russian Arms Makers, a non-governmental organization chaired by Kalashnikov, said the letter was "the result of the veterans' pain."

Izhmash was founded as a defense factory, but it has been struggling to get the state orders in recent years because of the irresponsible approach of the Defense Ministry, he said by telephone.

Putin ousted Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov earlier this week, a move Turygin said was widely expected in the industry.

He also suggested that the delay in appointing the plant's CEO was a result of the veterans' outcry.

Izhmash spokeswoman Yelena Filatova declined to comment on the letter Wednesday.

The press service of Russian Technologies said that the decision to postpone the tender wasn't linked to the petition to Putin.

Five candidates are competing for the position vacated earlier this year, including acting CEO Alexander Kosov, the state corporation said in the statement. An independent commission will choose the winner through an open vote, it said.

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