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Forest Defender Stabbed in Moscow Region

By Jonathan Earle

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Lyudmila Garifulina

A State Duma deputy's assistant and local lawmaker who battled development in Moscow region forestland is in critical condition after being stabbed in the chest by an unidentified assailant near her home in the village of Zelyony on Wednesday night.

Lyudmila Garifulina, 63, was stabbed four times, including once near her heart, about 9:30 p.m. as she was returning from a town council meeting in Staraya Kupavna, a town of 29,000 people about 15 kilometers east of Moscow, said Dmitry Trunin, her lawyer.

At least one fellow activist immediately pointed a finger at the local administration, with whom Garifulina had clashed over plans to construct apartment buildings and a road in a nearby forest.

"She's a deputy with a capital 'D,' defending residents from lawless behavior by officials

and the local administration. ... This is the price she paid for it," said fellow activist Nina Romanova, who had just returned from Garifulina's bedside. She said Garifulina is currently in a medically induced coma.

A woman who answered the phone at the office of Staraya Kupavna head Igor Sukhin said she hadn't heard of the attack and couldn't provide any commentary.

Police are working to identify and apprehend the assailant, according to a statement on the regional police's website. They're also considering opening a criminal investigation into the intentional infliction of a grave injury, which carries a maximum sentence of eight years in prison.

If Garifulina hadn't been wearing a thick fur coat, she would have died on the spot, an assistant to State Duma Deputy Valery Zubov said. Garifulina has worked as an unpaid helper to Zubov for the last five or six years, the assistant said. She refused to give her name.

Zubov, a member of the Just Russia party and the former governor of the Krasnoyarsk region, was one of only eight deputies to vote against a ban on U.S. adoptions passed in December.

He sent an official request on Thursday to Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev asking him to take "firm control" of the investigation into the attack on Garifulina, Zubov's assistant said.

The stabbing was the second assault on Garifulina in recent months. In November, she was struck on the head and robbed of her purse and deputy's badge as she was exiting a bus.

"After the first attack, she went up to our local police chief and asked, 'What's going on with my case?' He said, 'We're working on it,' and that was it," said Romanova, the activist.

For years, Garifulina has fought against clearing local forestland to make way for construction projects, including high-rise apartment buildings and a road, both of which were approved by local officials, Romanova said.

Wednesday's stabbing was the latest in a string of violent attacks on conservationists in the Moscow region, including several who campaigned against an $8 billion highway through a forest in the city of Khimki that was tied to a close friend of President Vladimir Putin.

In November, the former Khimki municipal property department head was sentenced to four years in prison for ordering one of the attacks, which took place in November 2010 and left activist Konstantin Fetisov with permanent brain damage.

"Only publicity can save other activists from such things," said Trunin, the lawyer.

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