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Police and 'Masked Men' Triggered May 6 Bolotnaya Violence, Inquiry Says

By Natalya Krainova

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A promotion for next Sunday's rally marking the one-year anniversary. **Vladimir Filonov**

A public inquiry has vindicated the protesters at an authorized anti-Kremlin rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad last May and accused police and unidentified men of creating chaos that triggered violent clashes.

The inquiry, sponsored by the liberal non-parliamentary political opposition, was presented to more than 1,000 opposition supporters at the concert hall of the Cosmos Hotel in Moscow late Monday.

A group of human rights activists, journalists, cultural figures, artists and scientists spent four months collecting and studying testimony from more than 600 witnesses, along with hundreds of photos and hours of video recordings from the May rally to prepare the report, which was released ahead of both the anniversary of last year's now infamous rally and a court hearing in the case set for Thursday.

More than 600 protesters were detained at the Bolotnaya rally, and "the mass nature of detentions was meant to create an impression of the mass nature of riots," said a 40-page report summing up the inquiry's findings and distributed at Monday's event.

The report denied the charges against the 26 Bolotnaya suspects, concluding that there were no mass riots on Bolotnaya but "separate actions of self-defense" by some protesters in response to "unprompted" aggression from police.

A total of 23 people are suspected of taking part in the alleged mass riots, and three people — Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and his allies Konstantin Lebedev and Leonid Razvozzhayev — are accused of orchestrating the chaos.

Fifteen of the 26 suspects are under arrest, including Razvozzhayev; five are under house arrest, including Lebedev and Udaltsov; four suspects have signed a written pledge not to leave the city; and one has been put on a federal wanted list.

The Moscow City Court is expected to deliver a verdict Thursday in the case against Lebedev, who has been charged with plotting mass riots at the May 6 rally and who pleaded guilty in early April.

In November, a Moscow Court sentenced Maxim Luzyanin, another participant of the rally, to 4 1/2 years in prison after convicting him of taking part in mass riots and assaulting police at the rally.

Luzyanin had pleaded guilty to the charges.

"They [the authorities] were afraid that a rally against Putin's life-long presidency would continue throughout the night until morning, right up to the inauguration [of Putin as president]," Boris Nemtsov, co-leader of the liberal opposition party RPR-Parnas, which initiated the inquiry, told the Cosmos concert hall on Monday.

Putin was elected to his third term last March with 71 percent of the vote in elections that many observers slammed as fraudulent.

The report also said there was a stampede at the rally provoked partly by police, who "created obstacles" for people walking to the rally's venue by standing in their way, fencing off the venue with metal barriers, leaving a small passageway for people and pushing them.

A group of unidentified masked men spotted by witnesses and cameras moved freely through police cordons, shouted extremist slogans, pushed police and protesters and threw plastic bottles at police, the inquiry found, though participants of Monday's presentation said none of the masked men were detained.

Alternatively, police pulled people at random from the crowd who were standing or calmly leaving the rally and beat them with batons, pulling their arms behind their backs and detaining them, witnesses said from the stage Monday.

Authors of Monday's report will ask the Prosecutor General's Office and the Investigative Committee to examine their findings and will complain to the European Court for Human Rights, United Nations and other foreign organizations.

The same opposition forces have asked City Hall for permission to rally on Bolotnaya this May 6, on the anniversary of last year's now infamous rally.

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