

Witnesses in Navalny Trial Say No Coercion

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Four prosecution witnesses in the embezzlement trial against opposition leader Alexei Navalny told the court Friday that they had not been pressured into cooperating with a company co-headed by Navalny, a day after another key witness said the opposite.

Navalny is currently standing trial in the town of Kirov, 990 kilometers east of Moscow, on charges of embezzling 16 million rubles (\$500,000) worth of timber from the state-owned company KirovLes while working as an adviser to regional governor Nikita Belykh in 2009.

The heads of three forestry enterprises that form part of KirovLes told the court Friday that they had voluntarily sold timber with a 10-percent discount to VLK LTD, a company co-founded by Navalny and his co-defendant Pyotr Ofitserov, Interfax reported.

The head of a fourth enterprise owned by KirovLes said he had refused to work with VLK because it was unprofitable for him, but that there was no pressure on him to sell timber.

That testimony follows a statement made on Thursday by another witness for the prosecution, former KirovLes director Vyacheslav Opalev, that Navalny forced him to sell timber at artificially low prices. In an earlier statement used by investigators to open the criminal case, Opalev said he had colluded with Navalny.

Opalev's inconsistent testimony prompted Navalny to accuse him of giving false testimony and making a deal with prosecutors, though Opalev attributed his contradictory statements to stress.

Navalny faces up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

Many observers view the case against Navalny as politically motivated, noting that the probe was opened after Navalny led thousands of people at an authorized anti-government rally in Moscow last May. If convicted, Navalny will be barred from running for political office.

The Leninsky District Court of Kirov on Friday granted permission to Navalny and Ofitserov, both of whom had signed a pledge not to leave Kirov, to spend the May holidays with their relatives in other regions until the trial resumes on May 15, RIA-Novosti reported.

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