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12 Suspects Deny Charges as Bolotnoye Trial Begins

By Natalya Krainova

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A protester holding a sign that reads “Fabrication of the Bolotnoye case is a state crime!” at a hearing on June 6. **Sergei Karpukhin**

A Moscow court on Tuesday opened the trial of 12 people suspected of taking part in "riots" and clashing with police at a now-infamous anti-government rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad last May.

More than 400 people were detained at the protest on May 6, 2012, and at least 14 participants of the rally now face criminal charges in what many see as a reaction by authorities to growing opposition activity in the country. Two others have already been sentenced to prison terms.

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demanded that prosecutors rewrite the charges with relevant clarifications, saying they could not understand them.

Critics view the proceedings that opened Tuesday as a show trial intended by the government to spook and sap the morale of opposition supporters.

An unofficial probe conducted by Russian human rights groups at the request of liberal opposition party RPR-Parnas and presented in April concluded that there were no riots at the rally.

On Tuesday, a prosecutor read the indictment, accusing the dozen defendants of either taking part in riots or committing violent acts against police or both. Participation in riots and attacking police carry maximum sentences of eight and five years in prison, respectively.

All the defendants denied the charges, saying they could not understand them and asking prosecutors to rewrite the charges with relevant clarifications.

Several defendants said they considered themselves victims of police violence, arguing that they attended a peaceful, authorized rally that was interrupted by police "for no reason."

Supporters who watched a broadcast of the trial on a screen outside the courtroom applauded several of the defendants who made long speeches and provided arguments in their defense.

At the start of the hearing, the defendants implored the judge to let them sit outside the glass cell they occupied inside the courtroom. The defendants complained that the cell, which accommodated ten men in an area of several square meters with four small windows in its sides, had little air, little space, poor sound and a poor view, as well as inadequate conditions for taking notes.

The other two defendants — young women who were not in pretrial detention — sat outside the glass cage beside the lawyers.

The judge, Natalia Nikishina, smiled at the defendants as they made their pleas, then rejected them, saying she lacked the authority to decide where the defendants should be kept during the trial and accusing the defense of "dragging out" the trial.

Although conducted by Moscow's Zamoskvoretsky District Court, Tuesday's hearing was held at the Moscow City Court building, which can accommodate more spectators. The hearing was attended by several dozen journalists, supporters and relatives, as well as three law enforcement officers in plain clothes who are considered victims in the case.

In addition to the 12 suspected participants in the "riots," three organizers are accused of having plotted and staged them, including Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov and his ally Leonid Razvozzhayev. They face up to ten years in prison if convicted of the charges.

The third person accused of being an organizer is Konstantin Lebedev, an associate of Udaltsov who was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison in April. He pleaded guilty to the charges, although supporters suspect that he did so under pressure from authorities. One person accused of participating in the "riots," Maxim Luzyanin, also pleaded guilty and received a 4 1/2-year prison term in November.

Anti-corruption blogger Alexei Navalny, who also helped lead last year's rally, is standing trial for the alleged large-scale theft of timber from state-owned KirovLes, a trial that many see as politically motivated.

In late April, several international human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, created a commission to investigate the alleged "riots" on Bolotnaya. Seven legal and human rights experts from the United States, Britain, Poland, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Moldova agreed to carry out the inquiry on a voluntary basis.

The trial against the 12 defendants is set to resume on Wednesday.

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