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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Activists Who Reported 'Putin's Palace' Put in Jail

By The Moscow Times

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Four environmental activists in southern Russia who once made controversial allegations about real estate linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin have been given lengthy jail terms for extorting money from a real estate developer, Russian media reported.

Four employees of the Gelendzhik Human Rights Center in the Krasnodar Region received jail terms of between eight and 13 years in a maximum security prison on extortion charges, Bfm.ru news website reported Monday.

The four were convicted of forcing a real estate developer to pay them 2 million rubles ($61,000) by threatening to harass him with complaints over an apartment building he had built in Gelendzhik with alleged violations, Bfm.ru said.

The activists denied the accusations, saying in court that the money was to be a payment for a legal out-of-court settlement they had negotiated on behalf of a local resident, but denying

they had ever taken the money themselves, the report said.

They also complained about police torture, reporting beatings and being burned with cigarettes. One activist said police had shoved a pink dildo in his mouth, Novaya Gazeta reported last year, adding that local investigators had thrown out all the complaints.

No information about the verdict was available on the website of the Gelendzhik City Court on Monday afternoon, and it was not immediately clear when the sentence had been issued. Novaya Gazeta said an appeal hearing was set for Thursday.

The rights center was targeted after it mounted a crackdown on illegal gambling clubs in Gelendzhik, Moskovsky Komsomolets tabloid said last year.

The group was the first to report in 2009 the existence of an opulent mansion near Gelendzhik allegedly built for Putin with numerous environmental violations. The Kremlin denied involvement in the project, dubbed "Putin's Palace" by bloggers and the media, and Putin's spokesman said Putin, then the prime minister, had nothing to do with the mansion.

The center also reported together with the Environmental Watch North Caucasus group in 2011 the construction of a so-called dacha for the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, also saying it was being built with violations. The Church leadership later said the mansion had been built to host high-profile church events, not vacationing hierarchs.

Rights activists in the Krasnodar Region have run into trouble with the authorities before: The head of Environmental Watch North Caucasus, Suren Gazaryan, was granted asylum in Estonia in June after he was included on Russia's wanted list for threatening to kill a guard at "Putin's Palace," a charge he said was fabricated.

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