

14 Greenpeace Activists Face Piracy Charges

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Greenpeace activist Anthony Perrett looking out from a defendants' box at a court hearing in Murmansk as he awaits trial with several other activists. **Sergei Eshchenko**

At least 14 crew members of a Greenpeace ship, the Arctic Sunrise, who took part in a protest near a Russian oil platform in the Arctic were hit with piracy charges Wednesday, in what Greenpeace called "an assault on peaceful protest" meant to intimidate environmental activists.

Armed Russian coastguards forcibly boarded the Arctic Sunrise on Sept. 19 after the activists tried to place a Greenpeace banner on the Prirazlomnaya platform, owned by state-run energy giant Gazprom Neft, to protest against oil drilling in the Arctic.

Twenty-eight Greenpeace activists of 19 nationalities, as well as a Russian photographer and a British videographer, were detained and transported to the northern city of Murmansk four days later, where they were officially taken into custody. A Murmansk court authorized

the arrest of all 30 people until Nov. 24.

Activists from Brazil, Sweden, Britain, Finland, Russia, Argentina, the Netherlands and Poland were charged on Wednesday, as well as a freelance British videographer, with the remaining members expected to be charged in the coming days. If found guilty, they face up to 15 years in prison.

Russian authorities said the arrests were warranted because the activists' actions had taken place in Russia's exclusive economic zone and were a deliberate provocation that could have hindered the work of the Prirazlomnaya and endangered those working on it. Greenpeace, however, said the Arctic Sunrise was located in international waters and that the piracy charges were "absurd" because the activists' actions were not violent.

"This is an outrage and represents nothing less than an assault on the very principle of peaceful protest," Greenpeace International executive director Kumi Naidoo said in a statement Wednesday.

"Any claim that these activists are pirates is as absurd as it is abominable. It is utterly irrational, it is designed to intimidate and silence us, but we will not be cowed," he said, adding that it was the most serious threat to Greenpeace's peaceful environmental activism in recent decades.

Ivan Blokov, head of Greenpeace programs in Russia, told RIA Novosti that Greenpeace could file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights if the Russian court passes a guilty verdict.

It is still unclear when court hearings will begin and whether they will take place in Moscow or Murmansk.

"Greenpeace and its lawyers will appeal the charges and the pretrial detention of all detained Arctic Sunrise members by all possible means in order to stop this ongoing lawlessness," Anton Beneslavsky, one of Greenpeace Russia's lawyers, said. He said he could not provide further details because certain procedural measures were confidential.

Veronika Dmitriyeva, wife of the arrested Greenpeace press service head, Andrei Allakhverdov, visited her husband in his Murmansk detention facility earlier this week and said it seemed like all the activists had been banned from any contact with the outside world. She said they had television sets in their cells but were allowed to watch only state-controlled television channels that presented them as pirates.

"From the moment the Arctic Sunrise was seized, I have had almost no communication with my husband. I have sent four letters but none of them were delivered. I just had a one-minute talk on the phone with him when he was on his way to the Murmansk Investigative Committee for interrogation," she said.

The lack of communication is what prompted her to travel from Moscow to Murmansk, she said, where she was allowed a 1 1/2-hour meeting with Allakhverdov after the arduous procedure of getting a permit to visit.

"It all looked like a movie: all those narrow corridors with cells on both sides, police officers

with dogs, our meeting through a glass and a phone receiver," she said.

Allakhverdov told his wife that all the activists were in different cells and that he was in one cell with two criminals, but conditions in the pretrial detention center were satisfactory, he said, likely because some activists were foreign.

"We agreed that anything could happen now, since oil in the Arctic was a soft spot for the Russian government," she said.

Political analysts interviewed by The Moscow Times seemed to agree with that notion, saying Russia's reaction was so harsh because it was a matter of big money.

Prirazlomnaya is Russia's first oil platform in the Arctic shelf, but the government said recently that oil drilling in the Barents Sea would be significantly expanded soon, with only two companies allowed to drill there: Gazprom and Rosneft. Those two companies could conclude contracts with foreign companies, however.

Vladimir Slatinov, a political expert with the Institute for Humanitarian and Political Research, said the actions of the authorities were in line with pressure placed on opposition activists and nongovernmental organizations to intimidate them and demonstrate the Kremlin's authority.

"The Kremlin wants to show that any attempts to infringe upon its political or business interests will be harshly rebuffed," he said, adding that the Kremlin saw this policy as the most effective way to either make Greenpeace stop its activity or play by the Kremlin's rules.

Putin, who is famous for his affectionate displays toward nature and the environment, said last week that the actions of the Greenpeace activists could not be considered piracy.

Slatinov, however, said that Putin's comments were a trick to make him out to be a "good cop," though he emphasized that the Investigative Committee would not be able to bring such serious charges without the Kremlin's approval.

Director of the Moscow Financial University's Center for Political Research, Pavel Salin, had a different view of the situation. He said the Greenpeace activists might be in the pockets of large corporations trying to lay claim to oil drilling in the Arctic.

"The question is about launching oil drilling on the Arctic shelf and consequently about a very large amount of money, so it looks like an internal corporate conflict with some large corporation trying to foil Gazprom's activity there and take its place, while the Greenpeace activists were used just as a means to achieve that," he said, adding that using activists in business conflicts was a regular scheme both in Russia and abroad.

It was probably orchestrated from the very beginning to get the case international attention, he said.

"Russia knows who is behind this, so if those corporations find a mutually beneficial solution, Russian authorities will find a nice way to stop the prosecution of the Greenpeace activists."

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