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11 Nobel Peace Prize Winners Urge Putin to Free Greenpeace Activists

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Brazilian activist Ana Paula Alminhana Maciel holding up a sign at a bail hearing in the Murmansk Regional Court. **Dmitri Sharomov**

International pressure on Russia over the arrest of Greenpeace activists mounted Thursday as 11 Nobel Peace Prize winners urged President Vladimir Putin to drop the piracy charges against them.

The 11 laureates made such an appeal in a letter sent to the Russian president, Greenpeace said. The letter, which may hold special significance for the president in light of his recent nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize, came just a day after German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed her concern to Putin over the arrest of the activists, and Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff and Argentinian Foreign Ministry said they would ask Russian authorities to release their citizens.

Twenty-eight Greenpeace activists, as well as a freelance photographer and a videographer,

were arrested last month and charged with piracy after trying to place a Greenpeace banner on the Prirazlomnaya oil platform, owned by state-run energy giant Gazprom Neft, to protest oil drilling in the Arctic.

The case against the multinational crew has attracted international attention, with top Western politicians raising the issue with Russian authorities and people around the world organizing demonstrations in support of the detainees.

"We, like millions of people around the world, are watching this case, eager to see Russian authorities drop the piracy charges, treat the 'Arctic 30' in accordance with international law, reaffirm the right to nonviolent protest and rededicate its efforts to protecting the Arctic," Nobel Laureates from 10 countries, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, said in their letter to Putin.

A Murmansk court authorized the arrest of all 30 people until Nov. 24. The Investigative Committee said last week that additional charges might be filed against some of the activists, as drugs were found on the Greenpeace ship, the Arctic Sunrise. Greenpeace has denied that there was anything illegal on board, however.

Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said that Putin was not the right person to turn to over the issue of the activists' arrest. "The president has great respect for the Nobel Laureates and always gives their opinion great attention, but in this case, the question is about a situation which the president has nothing to do with," he said in comments carried by RIA Novosti.

Putin said in September that the actions of the Greenpeace activists could not be considered piracy but that they had violated international norms by trying to board the Prirazlomnaya platform.

"We were heartened by your statement that you did not believe the Greenpeace crew members were pirates," the Nobel Laureates wrote to Putin. "As you know, the Greenpeace activists were unarmed and used only peaceful means to demonstrate their opposition to the oil drilling operations threatening the Arctic."

On Thursday, a Murmansk court rejected appeals to release two activists on bail, Mannes Ubels from the Netherlands and Colin Keith Russell, an Australian citizen. The court also refused to release the Arctic Sunrise captain, Peter Willcox from the U.S., and a number of other activists during the hearings held since last week. The remaining appeals will be heard in the next few days.

Anton Beneslavsky, one of Greenpeace Russia's lawyers, said that the team of lawyers working in Murmansk would file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights over the activists' arrest as soon as all appeals were heard by the Murmansk court.

"Lawyers will not just passively wait for further steps by the authorities; they will file a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights. The outrage going on in the Russian court will be impossible there," he said by phone.

Beneslavsky added that every gesture of support for the Greenpeace activists was important,

but added that he doubted the letter from the Nobel Laureates would push the Russian authorities to change their stance on the case.

"Unfortunately, the system standing against us is not sensitive to social influence," he said, adding that international pressure should continue anyway.

On Wednesday, relatives of six arrested British citizens appealed to Russia to free the activists as soon as possible, British media reported.

The U.S. State Department and the British Foreign Office have said they will continue to provide all the necessary support to their citizens. British Foreign Secretary William Hague said London could issue an official diplomatic note to Moscow.

Other politicians have also raised the issue. German Chancellor Angela Merkel told Putin of her concern over the arrest of the activists Wednesday, saying she hoped the case would be resolved soon, her spokesman said in a statement.

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry passed a diplomatic note to a representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry over the rejected appeal to release on bail a Ukrainian citizen, Ruslan Yakushev, who worked as a cook on the Arctic Sunrise. In the note, Ukraine said Yakushev did not participate in the Greenpeace protest directly and should be released.

Earlier, Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff and Argentinian Foreign Ministry said they intended to ask Russian authorities to release their citizens, while Denmark and Finland, whose citizens were also on the Arctic Sunrise crew, said they would not intervene in the case.

The Netherlands, whose flag the Arctic Sunrise sailed under, said in September it would appeal the arrest of the whole crew via international judicial bodies.

The case has led to a serious chill in Dutch-Russian relations, despite this year being devoted to 400 years of bilateral ties. Joint cultural projects and bilateral visits have been planned throughout 2013 to celebrate the anniversary.

In parallel with the Greenpeace case, relations between the two nations have been tainted by other incidents as well, though it is unclear if they are all related. A Russian diplomat was attacked in The Hague and a Dutch diplomat was beaten in Moscow, prompting a number of Dutch politicians to call for the bilateral year to be cut off.

Dmitry Oreshkin, a political analyst and the head of the Merkator research group, said that international calls would be unlikely to stop the Russian authorities from further prosecution of the activists.

"Putin has signaled that he cannot be bothered with the case and that law enforcement authorities can do whatever they want, and so far, there have been no signs that the latter will go back on their decision to keep the activists in prison," he said.

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