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Politkovskaya Murder Trial Jury Disbanded

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A Moscow City Court has dissolved the jury in the Anna Politkovskaya murder trial after three of its members failed to turn up for a hearing Thursday.

In statements read out by the judge at the beginning of the hearing, two jury members asked to be released from their duties due to poor health and a third on account of a business trip, Interfax reported.

A fourth member, who had been serving as jury foreman, was released from his duties Tuesday due to a business trip.

The judge said Thursday that it was impossible to continue the trial with less than 12 jury members and promptly dissolved the jury. A new one is to be formed on Jan. 14.

The defendants' lawyers immediately accused investigators of pressuring the jury members

and asked that the information in the absentee jury members' statements be checked.

"We will absolutely appeal the disbandment, but there's little hope, since we will be appealing in a Moscow City Court. It's a shameful practice, when they try to win by these means," said defense lawyer Murad Musayev.

Prosecutor Maria Semenenko in turn blamed the situation on the month-and-a-half long sequestration that the jury endured and on Musayev personally, who she said may have "organized" the sequestration, Rapsi reported.

Murayev was charged with bribing witnesses and interfering in court proceedings last week in what he and colleague Alexei Mikhalchik called an attempt to discredit the defense in the eyes of the jury.

Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya was shot to death in the elevator of her Moscow apartment building in October, 2006. Her murder was widely seen as punishment for her vocal criticism of Chechnya's leadership and Russian government policy in the North Caucasus.

Five defendants are now standing trial on counts of murder and illegal arms trafficking: Lom-Ali Gaitukayev, his three nephews Rustam, Ibragim and Dzhabrail Makhmudov, and former police officer Sergei Khadzhikurbanov.

With Murayev as their lawyer, Ibragim Makhmudov, Dzhabrail Makhmudov, and Khadzhikurbanov were acquitted in an earlier ruling, but the decision was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2009.

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