

Environmental Groups Lobby for Jailed Activist Ahead of Games

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Four high-profile environmental and human rights groups held a news conference Wednesday in a bid to help a jailed activist who criticized construction for the 2014 Sochi Olympics over supposed harm it has done to the environment.

The groups — Human Rights Watch, Greenpeace Russia, the Khimki Forest Movement and the Ecological Watch for the North Caucasus — said activist Yevgeny Vitishko had been persecuted by Russian authorities. They called his jailing last month one of numerous rights violations that they want the International Olympic Committee to condemn before the start of the Sochi Games in 16 days.

The international community has accused Russian authorities of discriminating against LGBT people, political activists and nongovernmental organizations ahead of the Olympics. Multiple state leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron and French President Francois Hollande, will not be coming to Sochi, in what some

say are snubs of the Kremlin over its human rights record.

Activists on Wednesday singled out the case of Vitishko, a member of the Ecological Watch for the North Caucasus, who was sentenced to three years in prison in late December for writing the word "thief" on a fence around the residence of Krasnodar region Governor Alexander Tkachyov.

Vitishko's complaints against Tkachyov were not related to Olympic construction but to what he said was illegal seizure of land for Tkachyov's residence in a nature reserve where construction is banned by law.

"Formally, it is not linked to the Olympics in any way, but the context is linked to the Olympics," Rachel Denber of Human Rights Watch told two dozen reporters at the Sakharov Center in response to a reporter's question.

"This was done to silence him so that he does not raise questions important for environmental protection and linked to the Olympics," Denber said.

Among concerns of ecologists linked to the environment in and around Sochi are a construction landfill in the nearby town of Akhshtyr, which could be contaminating the water that directly supplies Sochi, and coastal erosion due to extensive construction, which increases the risk of damaging newly built sport facilities and other infrastructure.

Vitishko is appealing his sentence and therefore it has not yet taken effect. The appeal will be heard the day before the Olympics' closing ceremony, Feb. 22, at a Krasnodar region court.

Speakers at Wednesday's news conference called on reporters to attend the hearing, saying that media attention could help Vitishko walk free.

Vitishko "found himself in the zone of pressure after he gave a few interviews about Sochi," Yulia Naberezhnaya of the Ecological Watch for the North Caucasus told reporters.

Human Rights Watch, Greenpeace Russia and other rights groups late last year sent a complaint to the International Olympic Committee about the purported persecution of Vitishko and other environmental activists in Russia, but there had been no reply as of Wednesday, said Mikhail Kreindlin of Greenpeace Russia.

An e-mail and repeated calls to the press office of the IOC in Lausanne, Switzerland, for comment on the issue went unanswered Wednesday afternoon.

"We are calling on the International Olympic Committee to voice its discontent with persecution of activists," Denber said.

The Ecological Watch for the North Caucasus will present a report on environmental violations related to Olympic construction and persecution of activists by the start of the Olympics, Naberezhnaya said.

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