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Jailed Environmental Activist Goes on Hunger Strike

By The Moscow Times

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Activist David Khakim being approached by two police officers in Sochi while protesting against the sentencing of Yevgeny Vitishko. **D. Goldman / AP**

Environmentalist Yevgeny Vitishko has declared a hunger strike after a court converted his earlier suspended sentence into a three year prison term, a fellow activist has said.

Activist Alexei Mandrigelya, who is a member of Vitishko's Environmental Watch on the North Caucasus, also sent out a Twitter message on Sunday, saying that a planned protest in support of Vitishko "needed people" and left a phone number for prospective participants to call.

Vitishko, who was given a suspended sentence in 2012 for spray-painting the fence of a local governor's property, had planned to travel to Sochi to deliver a report on the environmental impact of Olympic construction, but was arrested by police for supposedly swearing at a bus stop in his hometown of Tuapse.

Last week, a court ruled that Vitishko had violated the terms of his suspended sentence, which included a travel ban, by planning to travel to Sochi, and sent him to prison for three years. Vitishko had filed for an official permission to travel to the Olympic city, his lawyer said.

The International Olympic Committee and the European Union have asked Russia to explain the array of charges it had brought against Vitishko, and the sentences — described as "disproportionate" by an IOC spokesman — that its courts have handed down. Human Rights Watch and other organizations have called Vitishko's prosecution politically motivated.

Rights groups have also accused officials in Sochi and nearby southern Russian regions of organizing what they described as a campaign of harassment and intimidation against independent journalists and public critics of the Games.

Sochi organizing committee spokeswoman Alexandra Kosterina said the Games coordinators relayed the IOC's inquiry into Vitishkov's sentence to government officials and expected a response within a couple of days, news reports said.

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