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Committee Against Torture Vows to Defy 'Foreign Agent' Label

By Allison Quinn

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Participants of the Nizhny Novgorod branch of the Committee Against Torture take part in the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture in Moscow.

A regional branch of a Russian human rights organization striving to expose police brutality and torture is the latest advocacy group to have been classified by the Justice Ministry as a "foreign agent."

The Nizhny Novgorod branch of the Committee Against Torture vowed to appeal the Justice Ministry's decision Monday, because "working under the label of 'foreign agent' for us is unacceptable and insulting," the group said in a statement.

If that doesn't work out, the branch will shut down operations before accepting the label, which carries negative Cold War-era connotations of espionage. "In the case of a negative outcome [in our appeal], our organization will be liquidated," the statement said, albeit indicating that the branch staff would continue its human rights work in some capacity.

A controversial 2012 law requires any nongovernmental organization that engages in vaguely defined “political activity” and receives foreign financing to register as “foreign agents” with the ministry, or face costly legal repercussions. Critics of the law say it is used to settle political scores or silence government critics by using a Soviet-era label to vilify NGOs.

Igor Kalyapin, the head of the Committee Against Torture and a member of the Kremlin's human rights council, slammed the ministry's decision in comments to the Novaya Gazeta newspaper on Monday.

“Prosecutors consider our activities those of a foreign agent because we publicly inform society and the authorities about incidents of torture by the police, and about how badly the Investigative Committee investigates them. And by doing so supposedly we are trying to change state policy,” Kalyapin said. “I mean, by the prosecutors' logic, it turns out that state policy is torture in police departments and the covering up of torture by investigative bodies.”

This is not the first time in recent months that the Committee Against Torture has made headlines. In early December, the group lost its Grozny offices to an arson attack shortly after Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov had accused the group of collaborating with terrorists.

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