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Prosecutors Seek 23 Years for Ukrainian Director as Trial Wraps Up

By Howard Amos

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Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov watches from a defendants' box as he attends a court hearing in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, July 21, 2015.

Russian prosecutors requested a 23-year prison sentence Wednesday for Ukrainian activist and film director Oleg Sentsov, who is accused of carrying out terrorist attacks in the Crimea region annexed by Russia last year.

Sentsov denies the charges and says they are revenge for his opposition of Russia's takeover of Crimea from Ukraine.

Prosecutors in a military court in the southern Russian city of Rostov-on-Don called for a 12-year prison term for Sentsov's co-defendant, Alexander Kolchenko.

Arrested by Russian security services in May last year, Sentsov, 39, is accused of collaborating with Ukraine's Right Sector nationalist group to commit two terrorist attacks in Crimea as

well as of establishing a terrorist organization, plotting to commit further attacks and illegal arms possession.

“For all his crimes I ask that Sentsov be given 23 years in a high security prison,” a state prosecutor told judge Sergei Mikhailyuk in Rostov's North Caucasus District Military Court, according to RIA Novosti.

Sentsov insists that the case is politically motivated and that Russia has no legal authority to put him on trial — having issued him with a Russian passport without his consent.

“Everything here is crystal clear. A court of occupiers cannot by definition be fair,” Sentsov said in his closing speech Wednesday, according to Mediazona, a news site focusing on human rights and legal cases.

Sentsov also quoted Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, saying “the greatest sin on this earth is cowardice,” and ended his speech with an address to all Russians. “I simply do not want you to be ruled by criminals. I want to urge Russians to learn not to be afraid,” he said, Mediazona reported.

A film director and pro-Ukraine activist who took part in popular protests that toppled pro-Russian Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych last year, Sentsov has said that he was tortured during his detention and threatened with rape and murder.

Sentsov's lawyers complained that the case against him used statements from an alleged accomplice, Gennady Afanasyev, who later retracted his testimony and said he was tortured in custody.

Afanasyev was sentenced to seven years in a high security prison by a Moscow court in December for taking part in a terrorist act. Another alleged accomplice, Alexei Chirny, was sentenced to seven years in a high security prison in April by a court in Rostov. Both men admitted their involvement in two arson attacks last spring against pro-Russian organizations in Crimea. Sentsov is accused of masterminding those arson attacks.

Prominent European and Ukrainian film directors have called for the release of Sentsov and last summer, Russia's pro-Kremlin director Nikita Mikhalkov appealed to President Vladimir Putin over the case.

Sentsov's co-defendant Kolchenko also denied all the accusations against him Wednesday.

“I do not agree with the terrorism charges and I do not admit my guilt. This case is fabricated and politically motivated,” he told the court in his closing speech, according to Mediazona.

Sentsov and Kolchenko will be sentenced on Aug. 25.

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