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Khodorkovsky Claims Russian State Blackmail Threat

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Former Yukos oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky has accused Russia's security services of blackmailing his former employee to give testimony against him in a murder trial, the Echo Moskvy radio station reported Tuesday.

The self-exiled opposition leader wrote on his Facebook Monday that he had been contacted by the lawyers of Alexei Pichugin, former head of internal economic security at the energy giant.

Pichugin is serving a life sentence in a high security prison after being found guilty of organizing several murders in 2005.

“Security Service officers visited him and threatened that if he doesn’t provide evidence for the case [against me] then they will arrest his brother. They have already called his brother in for questioning and searched his home. He has left Russia,” Khodorkovsky wrote.

Khodorkovsky has been charged with ordering Pichugin to kill the Mayor of Nefteyugansk, Vladimir Petukhov, in 1998. Pichugin has already been found guilty of the crime and sent to the notorious Black Dolphin penal colony in Russia's Orenburg region. Pichugin was removed from the colony Monday, and his whereabouts have not been confirmed, the Open Russia news website reported.

Khodorkovsky, a fierce critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has repeatedly urged Pichugin to give any testimony that will lead to his freedom, a move which Pichugin has so far refused.

The former Yukos CEO is also being investigated in Russian for tax evasion. Many human rights groups believe the proceedings to be politically motivated.

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