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Prominent Russians Ask Putin to Spare Jailed Chechen Activist

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Oyub Titiev (Yelena Afonina / TASS)

Scores of famous Russian artists, scientists and religious leaders have signed a petition asking President Vladimir Putin to release a human rights activist facing 10 years in prison on drug possession charges in Chechnya.

Oyub Titiyev, 60, is on trial for what Human Rights Watch said are "bogus marijuana possession charges." The head of the Grozny branch of the Memorial human rights center has been behind bars since his arrest on Jan. 9.

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"We appeal to you as the guarantor of the Russian Constitution to ensure the immediate transfer of the Titiyev case to the federal level, to take over the case and to put an end to the persecution of Memorial," reads the petition signed by 60 figures published on Monday.

Its signatories include veteran human rights defender Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the mufti of Moscow Ildar Alyautdinov, as well as dozens of actors, poets and academics.

The daughter of Titiyev's predecessor Natalya Estemirova, who was kidnapped and gunned down in 2009, has also issued an appeal to secure the activist's release.

"All it takes is for Russia's president to pick up the phone and tell the authorities in Chechnya to get their hands off Oyub and Memorial," Human Rights Watch cited Lana Estemirova as saying in a video published Tuesday.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov hit back at the petition's signatories in an impassioned Telegram post, calling the appeal an "unveiled attempt to interfere with the investigation and the trial."

"I'd like to ask the signatories if at least one of them had heard or read about rights defender Oyub Titiyev before news of his detention emerged," he wrote.

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