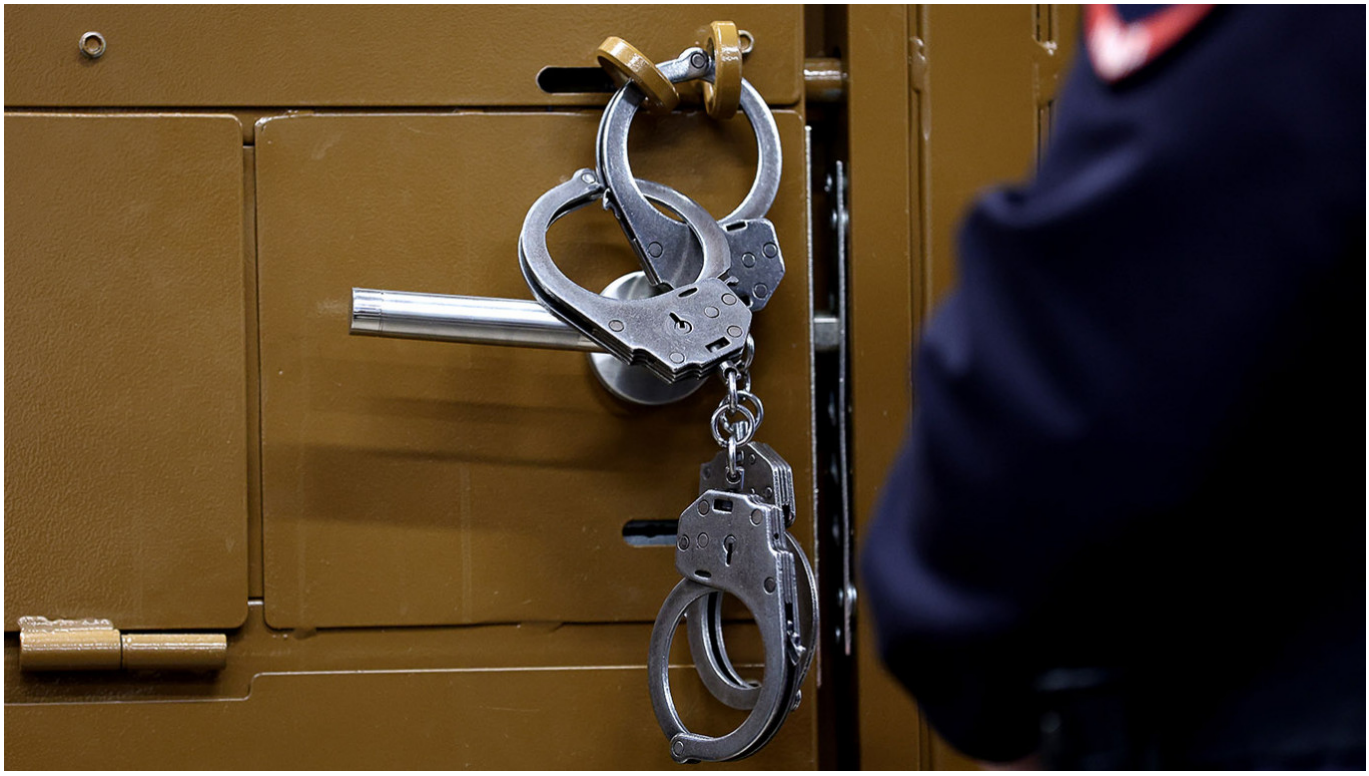
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Police Raids, Arrests Reported in Bashkortostan as Tensions Rise Over State-Backed Mining Project

By Leyla Latypova

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Sergei Bobylev / TASS

Authorities in Russia's republic of Bashkortostan and the neighboring Chelyabinsk region raided homes and detained activists who oppose a government-backed plan to develop copper mining deposits near their communities, local media reported Thursday.

Earlier this year, a subsidiary of mining giant Russian Copper Company (RCC) confirmed plans for exploration and mineral production in the Kyrktytau mountain range, a popular area for outdoor tourism.

The move fueled discontent among locals and regional environmental activists, who say the project would inflict irreparable ecological damage to their Indigenous lands and other ecosystems connected to it, including in neighboring Kazakhstan.

Security forces searched the house of prominent Bashkir activist Ural Baybulatov in the early hours of Thursday, RFE/RL's Volga-Ural service Idel.Realii reported, citing an anonymous source familiar with the matter.

Baybulatov was released on bail pending trial late on Thursday, Idel.Realii reported.

He is accused of conspiring to "publicly disseminate knowingly false information about circumstances posing a threat to the life and safety of citizens," the outlet reported. The offense is punishable by up to three years in prison.

The charges against Baybulatov are allegedly linked to a Telegram post published in April in which he outlined six reasons against mining at Kyrktytau.

Magnitogorsk-based businessman Ildar Khabirov, who campaigned against the mine, also had his home raided by security officers on Thursday, according to local Telegram channels. His whereabouts remain unknown.

Opponents of the mine have waged a widespread online campaign and launched two petitions against it. But authorities have repeatedly refused to authorize their requests to hold protests under varying pretexts.

Related article: In Russia's Bashkortostan, Fresh Tensions Grow Over Planned Copper Mining Site

The mining site lies near the rural settlement of Salavat-sovkhoz in southeastern Bashkortostan's Abzelilovsky district.

Kyrktytau defenders also attended several town halls with the mining company's representatives, where videos of Abzelilovsky district residents' passionate speeches soon went viral.

Ordinary residents who oppose the mine were also targeted in Thursday's raids, several local Telegram channels reported. Though no arrests have been confirmed, reports indicate that law enforcement threatened people with detention in case of any future public opposition to the project, including on social media.

Tensions around Kyrktytau are unfolding as Russian courts continue to hand down sentences to the more than 80 Bashkir men and women arrested in the Baymak case, the largest political trial in modern Russian history.

In January 2024, several thousand people protested in Bashkortostan's southwestern town of Baymak against the imprisonment of prominent Indigenous Bashkir rights activist Fayil Alsynov.

Alsynov himself was sentenced to four years in a penal colony on charges linked to his role in protests against illegal gold mining in Bashkortostan.

Defendants in the Baymak case held a protest in defense of Kyrktytau during their court hearing on Tuesday, holding a sign that read "Kyrkty live on!!!"

“The authorities are doing everything they can to make people afraid to defend their land, afraid to express their opinions, afraid to mention anything about the authorities [and their role in mining at Kyrktytau],” Lilia Chanysheva, the exiled former regional coordinator of Alexei Navalny's political network in Bashkortostan, wrote on Telegram on Thursday.

“But the truth…is on our side, the side of the local residents and people who love their land and want to preserve it for their children. These repressions won’t last forever. A turning point will come, and those who have oppressed our people for decades will be held accountable — if not before the people, then surely before God,” Chanysheva added.

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