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Men Jailed Over 2022 Crimean Bridge Blast Plead for Release

By AFP

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All eight defendants in the bridge bombing trial appear in court. **Erik Romanenko / TASS**

Eight men who were handed life sentences by Russian judges over an attack on a bridge linking Crimea to Russia issued a joint appeal to be freed on Tuesday, saying they did not know about the Kyiv-planned operation.

The 2022 blast killed five people and badly damaged the Crimean Bridge, which was built after Russia annexed the region from Ukraine in 2014 and became a potent symbol of Russian leader Vladimir Putin's ambitions.

The bridge has suffered two further major attacks in 2023 and 2025, both carried out by Ukrainian forces as part of their fight against Russia's invasion.

The men — who hail from Russia, Ukraine and Armenia — appealed to Putin, U.S. President Donald Trump and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky to include them in any prisoner releases

agreed in talks on how to end the war.

They were jailed last year but have always denied their guilt, describing themselves in their plea for freedom as "eight ordinary people... who got up every day to earn for bread, pay rent, hug their kids."

"But now we are 'terrorists.' We are sentenced to life in prison, to a slow and degrading death in the cement cages of Russian prisons," they said in the letter published by Russia's Memorial rights group.

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Some of the men were linked to the transport of construction material which turned out to have been packed with hidden explosives, but have always insisted they did not know about it.

Rights groups have said they were performing their usual work duties, and Kyiv said they used people who were "in the dark" about the operation.

The men include the head of a St. Petersburg logistics company, farmers and fruit traders from occupied Ukraine and a truck driver.

At the sentencing in November, logistics and supply manager Oleg Antipov — who had found a driver to transport materials to Crimea — shouted: "We are innocent!"

In 2023, the then-head of Ukraine's SBU, Vasyl Malyuk, admitted Kyiv had used "so many people in the dark" for the attack and said Moscow had arrested people who were "in reality engaged in their usual everyday business."

Among them is farmer Roman Solomko from occupied Ukraine, who advised a neighbor — possibly an SBU agent — on how to bring materials into Russia following the imposition of Western sanctions.

He insisted he was unaware of the explosives.

The other men include Vladimir Zlob, a fruit trader; Artyom and Georgy Azatyan, brothers who owned a warehouse; Alexander Bylin, another trader; and Armenian trucker Artur Terchanyan — who say they were part of what they thought was regular transport logistics.

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