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Russia: ‘Hooliganism’ charges do not apply to peaceful Greenpeace protest

The new “hooliganism” charges levelled against crew members involved in last month’s Greenpeace Arctic Sunrise protest in Russian waters are inappropriate and should be dropped, Amnesty International said today.

In a statement on Wednesday, Russia’s Federal Investigative Committee said that it was dropping the piracy charges originally brought against the activists and replacing them with charges of “hooliganism”. The maximum punishment under Russian law is seven years’ imprisonment.

“The piracy charges originally brought in this case were patently absurd – but these new charges are no better. Hooliganism is a serious criminal offence in Russia, and it is not one that those engaging in peaceful protest should be prosecuted under,” said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

Under Russia’s Criminal Code, hooliganism charges can only be brought against those using weapons to commit gross violations of public order on the grounds of hatred for a particular racial, ethnic, religious or social group.

The provision is vague and open to abuse, and Amnesty International believes it should not be applied in this case.

“This Russian roulette of criminal charges must stop. The Arctic 30 activists must be released immediately and the Russian authorities must halt their ill-founded attempts to criminally prosecute them,” said Dalhuisen.

“The Russian authorities have an ulterior motive behind their repeated attempts to use criminal charges, when, under Russian law, only administrative offences might apply to the detained Greenpeace activists. They want to send a strong message that protests, however peaceful, won’t be tolerated and any infringements, however minor, will be met with severe penalties.”

The “hooliganism” charge was also brought against members of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot last year. Amnesty International campaigned against the application of the charge in their case and considers two of the women serving a two-year prison sentence in a labour camp to be prisoners of conscience.