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Russian activists jailed over freedom of assembly protest

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate release of three Russian opposition activists detained in Moscow after a peaceful and sanctioned rally calling for freedom of assembly and later sentenced to administrative detention.

Boris Nemtsov, a former deputy prime minister and opposition activists, Ilia Iashin and Konstantin Kosiakin were among about 70 arrested at the rally in Central Moscow on 31 December 2010, the latest in a regular series of rallies in the Russian capital demanding to uphold the right to freedom of assembly.

They were sentenced on 2 January 2011 to 15, five and 10 days of administrative detention respectively for allegedly failing to follow police instruction, despite eyewitnesses reporting that they had not obstructed police officers.

“Yet again, the Russian authorities have failed in their obligations to protect the rights to freedom of assembly, a right guaranteed by the Russian Constitution” said Andrea Huber, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director.

“The organization considers them prisoners of conscience detained solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression”.

Amnesty International has also expressed concern at reports indicating that the trial failed to meet international standards of fairness. At the trial of Boris Nemtsov the judge did not grant his defence lawyers request to use video evidence that showed him being led away peacefully or to cross-examine two police officers.

The court reportedly based its guilty verdict on the statements of the two police officers and ignored the statements of thirteen defence witnesses.

Some of the detained protesters also reported fabrication by police officers of the circumstances of their detentions.

“The Russian authorities consistently disregard the standards of fair trials thus turning them in kangaroo courts which dispense politically motivated sentences,” Andrea Huber said.

For nearly two years, pro-freedom of assembly demonstrators gather in Triumfalnaya Square, in the centre of Moscow, on the 31st day of the month to highlight Article 31 of the Russian constitution, which protects the right to freedom of assembly.

In October 2010 the new mayor of Moscow Sergei Sobyenin sanctioned the protest for the first time. Another, unsanctioned, protest reportedly took place on the other side of the square.

Protesters called for freedom of expression and assembly and called for the Prime Minister Vladimir

Putin to stand down. They also held placards calling for the release of prominent businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an outspoken critic of the Kremlin who was convicted on 27 December 2010 of money-laundering.

More than 50 people were arrested at a similar rally in St Petersburg, which had not been sanctioned.