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Farmers and truck drivers imprisoned for a peaceful protest against corruption

Following a peaceful protest by farmers from the Kuban Region in southern Russia, an increasing number of people have been detained in so-called administrative detention in Rostov-on-Don and the Krasnodar area, in clear violation of their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. All individuals detained in connection with the farmers' peaceful protest should be released immediately and unconditionally as they have been detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their rights.

At 6am on 2 September, in the latest spate of arrests, four members of the independent Road Haulage Association of Russia, Andrei Bazutin, Arkady Moshnikov, Sergei Rudametkin and Nadezhda Kurazhkovskaya, were arbitrarily arrested and detained for taking part in an "unsanctioned meeting". They had travelled south from Moscow and other cities and were staying in a lorry park in Rostov-on-Don to show support for other colleagues who had been previously detained.

The protests began on 21 August, when the farmers left the village of Kazanskaya in the Krasnodar Region in a column of 17 tractors and some cars aiming to drive 1,300 kilometres to Moscow. The aim of the protest was to complain to President Vladimir Putin in person about the complicity of regional officials and judges in illegal appropriation of land by large agricultural holding companies. The farmers were stopped near Rostov-on-Don, on 22 August, by about 100 policemen.

On that day, the Regional Presidential Plenipotentiary and his staff held a number of meetings with the farmers in a roadside café and promised to examine their claims, but after the Presidential Plenipotentiary left, the farmers were detained overnight in a nearby motel by special task force units of the Interior Ministry. Most of them were arrested on 23 August and charged with the administrative offence of violating the law on public assemblies. According to the indictment, the "unauthorized gathering" took place on the territory of the roadside café (where they met the state officials) and was dispersed by the police force.

The next day three of the protesters, Sergei Vladimirov, Nikolay Maslov and Oleg Petrov, were sentenced to 10 days administrative arrest. Ten more people, including the leader of the Polite

Farmers movement Aleksei Volchenko, were fined from 10,000 to 30,000 roubles (US\$150-450). Over the next few days, the crackdown on farmer activists continued.

Aleksei Volchenko was again arrested on 25 August near his home. He was charged under a repressive law introduced in March 2016 that outlawed unauthorised motorcades along with unauthorised public rallies and demonstrations. The next day, the Kavkazsky District Court of Krasnodar sentenced him to 10 days of administrative arrest for taking part in an “unsanctioned public gathering”. Rustam Mallamagomedov, a member of the Road Haulage Association of Russia, was tried in absentia. He had been briefly hospitalized at the time, having been beaten by police officers after they blocked the convoy on 22 August.

On 27-28 August, 11 more activists, Oleg Lunev, Andrey Pezin, Vyacheslav Petrovsky, Semyon Smykov, Sergei Gorbachev, Sergei Gerasimenko, Ye. Miroshnik, N. Svetlichny, Viktor Zelensky, Vladimir Pavlov and S. Vatulin, were sentenced by the same court to 3-10 days of administrative arrest.

Aleksei Volchenko pleaded guilty during his first administrative trial after interrogators reportedly threatened him that he would be charged with a criminal offence under “extremism legislation”. His lawyer told Amnesty International that he can’t confirm or deny this information, but he thought it was significant that an agent of the Federal Security Service (FSB) took part in the interrogation.

The Road Haulage Association came into being following protests in December 2015 by truck drivers over the introduction of a new road tax for heavy goods vehicles.

Peaceful protests have been mounting in a context of growing dissatisfaction over economic conditions and corruption in Russia.

Lyudmilla Volchenko, mother of Aleksei Volchenko, told Amnesty International that local officials had connived with the agricultural holding company to deprive them of land that they owned. In some cases this involved digging canals to block access. The farmers had attempted to establish their claim to the land through the courts, but they had not had fair trials. “The courts turned us down, despite the fact that we had 20 witnesses to prove our case,” she told Amnesty International.

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