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Russian Federation: Who is afraid of Aleksandr Nikitin?

Today's ruling by the Russian Supreme Court to refer the case of Aleksandr Nikitin back for additional investigation by the Federal Security Services (FSB), appears to be a sign of the power that the FSB has over the judiciary, Amnesty International said.

“Given the lack of substantial evidence and the overwhelming doubt that the FSB can find new evidence, this decision by the highest judicial body in the country is extremely worrying,” Amnesty International said.

“The court is keeping Aleksandr Nikitin in an endless legal limbo, where a case could go back and forth for additional investigation indefinitely.”

Amnesty International is convinced that another round of investigation into this case will yield nothing new. The case has been under investigation for three years and the prosecution has not managed to come up with an indictment with a tenable factual and judicial foundation.

In the absence of new evidence, the risk is that the judge might once more refer the case back to the FSB, leaving Nikitin at risk of imprisonment and possible harassment by FSB agents.

Amnesty International continues to call for all charges against Aleksandr Nikitin to be dropped. He could still face up to 20 years in prison for actions that the Russian authorities describe as an “act of treason”, but which Amnesty International and the Russian human rights movement call the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression.

The organization has always maintained that Aleksandr Nikitin is innocent of the charges brought against him and that he should not have stood trial in the first place.

Background information:

Aleksandr Nikitin was arrested by the FSB on 6 February 1996, after writing two chapters for the Norwegian environmental group Bellona Foundation's report on the risks of radioactive contamination from accidents with nuclear submarines in Russia's Northern Fleet. Amnesty International adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

He was held in pre-trial detention until 14 December 1996, when he was released. The charges against him, however, remained and he was officially restricted to the city limits of St Petersburg pending trial.

Bill Bowring, a human rights lawyer and member of the Human Rights Centre at the University of Essex, observed the trial proceedings in October 1998 on behalf of Amnesty International, to monitor whether the legal procedure was followed in line with international standards.

The Supreme Court ruling upheld an earlier decision of the St Petersburg Court in October 1998. Judge Sergey Golets of the St Petersburg City Court motivated his original decision with the

fact that the indictment for treason and espionage against Russia's high-profile environmentalist was too unclear and based on expert evidence unacceptable to the court. The indictment was the result of three full years of investigation by the FSB.

In an unprecedented move, earlier this week, the Supreme Court decided to hold its hearing behind closed doors, citing the possibility of state secrets being revealed to the public.

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Mariana Katzarova, Researcher on the Russian Federation, is available for comments regarding the case of Aleksandr Nikitin. To contact her or to receive further information, please call Amnesty International's Press Office in London on:

+44 171 413 5566/5808/5810. Video footage of Aleksandr Nikitin is also available.