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Russia: Grigory Pasko gets four years in a labour camp for speaking out for the environment

The conviction of Grigory Pasko for his reporting activities is a violation of his right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today. The organization has now adopted the Russian journalist and environmental activist as a prisoner of conscience.

Grigory Pasko was convicted on the basis of a secret military decree in a Vladivostok court in December 2001, and sentenced to four years in a labour camp. The prosecution alleged that he gathered information with the intention of handing it over to Japanese media.

In 1993 Grigory Pasko filmed a Russian navy tanker dumping radioactive waste and ammunition in the Sea of Japan. Also in this film and a series of articles, he showed the threat to the environment caused by ships from Russia's decaying Pacific fleet, including nuclear submarines. In his first trial in 1999, which was closely monitored by Amnesty International and other organisations, Grigory Pasko was charged with treason and espionage. Although these charges were dismissed, he was convicted of the lesser offence of abuse of his position and released under amnesty.

At the instigation of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Military Procuracy of the Russian Pacific Fleet, the case was reopened in 2001. During the second trial, which began in July of that year, and was closed to the public, nine of the 10 charges against Grigory Pasko were dismissed. The remaining charge was that he had intended to pass to

foreign media information that would have weakened the battle readiness of the Pacific Fleet.

"The prosecution of Grigory Pasko appears motivated by political reprisal for exposing the practice of dumping nuclear waste into the sea. As such, the case appears to be a clear breach of national and international norms protecting freedom of expression that the Russian state is obliged to uphold," Amnesty International said.

"The conviction of Grigory Pasko chills legitimate inquiry into matters of public interest," the organization added, calling for the conviction against him to be quashed and for him to be immediately released.

Amnesty International also expressed concern that the conviction of Grigory Pasko was secured through the use of a secret decree of the Russian Ministry of Defence. "This defies a November 2001 ruling by the Russian Supreme Court to the effect that the constitution forbids the use of secret decrees in criminal cases," the organization said.

Background

In November 1997 Grigory Pasko was arrested by the FSB and at the end of a six-month closed military trial in 1999 he was pronounced guilty of abusing his official position. Amnesty International expressed serious concerns about the fairness of the trial, and about the impartiality and independence of the court. Grigory Pasko was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for misusing his official position, but was immediately released from detention under the terms of a nationwide amnesty. Charges of treason and espionage, for which the prosecution demanded a sentence of 12 years in a labour camp, were dismissed by the court.

Both sides in the 1999 trial, the military prosecutors and Grigory Pasko, appealed against the conviction. Grigory Pasko's claim that the prosecution could not demonstrate that he had committed any crime was dismissed. The Military Procuracy protested against the "unfair leniency of the sentence" and in November 2000 the Military Collegium of the Russian Supreme Court decided that not all the materials and facts of the case had been taken into consideration and sent the case back for a new trial in Vladivostok. After several postponements, the case started again only in July 2001.

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