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Russia: Putin urged to reject law restricting the right to peaceful assembly

The Russian authorities must stop curtailing freedom of expression and assembly, Amnesty International urged after the country's parliament adopted a bill that hikes up fines for protesters taking part in unsanctioned rallies.

The move by President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party means those participating in "unsanctioned public meetings" can be fined up to 30,000 rubles (\$900 US) and up to 300,000 rubles (\$9,000 US) if the event causes damage to property or causes injuries.

The bill, which has rapidly passed through the Duma in just a few weeks, will become law once President Putin has signed it off.

"The Russian authorities must protect the right to freedom of expression and assembly, not curtail it," said John Dalhuisen, Director of Europe and Central Asia, of Amnesty International.

"The speed with which this law has been passed suggests that it is not aimed at regulating a respected right but is rather a short-sighted response to growing public protest."

"President Putin on the day of his inauguration spoke out in favour of greater participation of citizens in public affairs and encouraged more consultations with different sectors of society about legal reforms.

"However, this draft law and the way it has been handled by the Russian parliament shows no respect for Russian citizens' views."

The draft law has been widely discussed and sharply criticised by Russian lawyers, human rights activists and parliamentarians.

It raises high fines for blocking pedestrians and traffic, damaging green areas and littering in the context of a "public meeting".

The proposed fines and sanctions are much higher than those for causing similar damage outside of protests.

Organizers of public meetings would face hefty fines if participants cause disorder or damage, something patently out of their control in a large gathering. The draft law is open to arbitrary and selective abuse by the authorities, as several of the amendments are vaguely worded.

"The law on public meetings is more a law to block protests and prevent public expressions of dissent," said John Dalhuisen.

"These amendments, if adopted, will move the law even further away from enabling the right to freedom of expression and assembly as guaranteed in the Russian Constitution."

The law could punish people for organizing any large gathering. Police recently detained numerous people during a stroll on Moscow's Red Square and its surrounding streets, carrying only white ribbons as a sign of protest against unfair elections.

Amnesty International has derided the Duma's suggestion of creating special areas in cities where demonstrations can be held.

"Demonstrations are meant to take place in public spaces. To confine them to a limited area where demonstrators can not reach out to those, whom they want to address with their protests, contradicts the core idea behind the right to freedom of assembly," said John Dalhuisen.

Over the past six months there have been several large and peaceful demonstrations against election fraud, where police and organizers upheld public order while allowing people to express their dissatisfaction.

Following a large demonstration on 6 May, which resulted in some violence, and ahead of more planned large scale demonstrations, Amnesty International is concerned that the authorities will take a far tougher line against demonstrations.

"The authorities must enable peaceful protests and prevent freedom of assembly from becoming an empty phrase in Russia," said John Dalhuisen.