

Yevgeny Vitishko sent to a penal colony



Ai UK website 24 March 2014

Yevgeny Vitishko is a prisoner of conscience, punished for exposing environmental damage around the construction of the Sochi Winter Olympics.

He has been charged with a string of petty crimes in recent years - from allegedly damaging a fence, to swearing at a bus stop - as local authorities attempt to

restrict his movements and clamp down on dissenting views.

In February 2014, he was sentenced to three years in prison for apparently damaging a fence. The charges, his conviction and Yevgeny's trial and appeal are all suspect - designed to punish him for speaking out.

On 19 March 2014, Environmental Watch for North Caucasus were informed that Yevgeny had been transferred to penal colony N2 in the Tambov region. A member of the local prison monitoring commission reported that Yevgeny is in quarantine. There is no additional information yet about how he is and whether he has any health problems.

Send a solidarity message

Thank you to the 15,000 of you who have taken action for Yevgeny. We are no longer asking you to send emails, but it's important to show Yevgeny and the prison authorities that he is still in our thoughts by sending him a card or letter of solidarity.

Please send bright, cheerful cards and, if possible, Google-translate your message or use one of the sample messages below - messages in foreign languages often don't pass the censors.

Sample messages in Russian:

"ДОРОГОЙ ЕВГЕНИЙ! МЫ ДУМАЕМ О ВАС И БОРЕМСЯ ЗА ВАШЕ ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЕ"

("Dear Yevgeniy, we are thinking about you and fighting for your release.")

"ДОРОГОЙ ЕВГЕНИЙ! МЫ С ВАМИ В ЭТО ТРУДНОЕ ВРЕМЯ"

("Dear Yevgeniy, we are with you in this difficult time.")

"ДОРОГОЙ ЕВГЕНИЙ! МЫ ВАС ПОДДЕРЖИВАЕМ И ЖЕЛАЕМ СКОРЕЙШЕГО ОСВОБОЖДЕНИЯ."

(Dear Yevgeniy, we support you and wish you to be released very soon.)

The address to send your messages to:

Vitishko Yevgeniy Gennadievich
393355 Tambovskaya Oblast, Kirsanovskiy raion,
pos. Sadovyi, ul. Zelenaya, d.11,
FKU KP-2
Russian Federation

Imprisoned for environmental activism

As a member of non-governmental organisation Environmental Watch for North Caucasus, Yevgeny and his colleagues have been harassed for speaking about ecological concerns around the Sochi Winter Olympics.

In 2012, Yevgeny appeared in court on charges of damaging an illegally-erected fence while he and others collected evidence of unlawful deforestation and construction in the area surrounding Sochi. The trial was politically-motivated; Yevgeny was dealt a two-year sentence that was suspended temporarily.

Until he was called to serve the prison sentence, Yevgeny was under strict curfew. At the end of last year, he was brought before court again for allegedly violating his curfew. The court ruled that he should spend three years in prison. Yevgeny challenged this and his appeal was set for February this year.

Pre-Sochi: detained for ‘swearing at a bus stop’

As Yevgeny's trial approached, he was approached by police. On Monday 3 February, they detained him, explaining that he was suspected of stealing. The police later changed his charge to petty hooliganism, in relation to allegations that Yevgeny had sworn out loud while at a bus stop.

The police took Yevgeny's fingerprints, inspected his mobile phone and ushered him to court that afternoon. When Yevgeny asked to see his lawyer in court, his request was refused; instead, he was offered a state-appointed lawyer, which he turned down.

Yevgeny's alleged crime of ‘swearing at a bus stop’ had apparently been overheard by two witnesses, who police claimed had signed statements condemning Yevgeny. Neither witness appeared in court.

Silenced during the Winter Olympics

Yevgeny was detained and sentenced just a few days before the Sochi Winter Olympics was due to start. His detention for 15 days, from the day of his arrest, meant that he was conveniently imprisoned for the majority of the Games. His arrest, court hearing and detention sentence (all rushed through in one day) were thinly-veiled attempts to prevent Yevgeny, a well-known environmental activist, from protesting while the world focused on Sochi.

Unfair appeal hearing

Yevgeny's appeal for the fence-damaging charges took place while he was in detention for swearing. He was only allowed to take part via video link. When his appeal was turned down, and his three-year prison sentence reaffirmed, Yevgeny was escorted from his detention cell to a police vehicle for transfer to a prison colony.

Wider crackdown on rights in Russia

One day after Yevgeny's detention, another member of Environmental Watch for North Caucasus was also seized by police on bogus charges. Igor Kharchenko was arrested on the pretext that his car had been ‘involved in a crime’ - right after three masked men had smashed in the vehicle's windows. Igor is currently being held in a police station in Krasnodar, in Sochi.