

U.S. to Speak Up for Rights Activists

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September 08, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Two senior U.S. officials promised that Washington would speak openly about its concerns over Russia's human rights record during a meeting with the country's top rights activists Wednesday, two activists said.

President Barack Obama's top Russia expert, Michael McFaul, and Undersecretary of State William Burns also said the state of human rights in Russia "must be one of the main topics" of talks between Washington and Moscow, said Oleg Orlov, head of Memorial rights group.

McFaul and Burns, a former ambassador to Moscow, said they hoped to improve the human rights situation in Russia through "public criticism" and "consultations to exchange experiences on particular issues," Orlov said by telephone.

"All of the Russian participants said they especially valued public statements because behind-the-scenes talks are known only to officials but not to civil society," Lyudmila Alexeyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group, said in a phone interview.

Prominent human rights activist Lev Ponomaryov failed to attend the meeting because he was jailed Tuesday for four days after a court found him guilty of ignoring police orders at an unsanctioned Moscow opposition rally on Aug. 12. Burns and McFaul called his absence "extremely unpleasant," Orlov said.

The State Department said last week that it had "concerns about intimidation of citizens" after police detained dozens of opposition activists trying to rally on Aug. 31 for their constitutional right to free assembly. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in a Kommersant interview published a day before the rally that the protesters deserved to be beaten because they had not received City Hall's permission to gather. City Hall has rejected all opposition requests to rally.

Orlov said a working group of Russian and U.S. rights activists would hold future discussions on issues like freedom of assembly, police reform, migration, conditions in prisons for minors and Russia's judicial and penitentiary systems.

The Civil Society Working Group, headed by McFaul and President Dmitry Medvedev's first deputy chief of staff, Vladislav Surkov, [will meet Thursday](#), a source close to the group told Gazeta.ru.

About 10 activists, mostly from Russian nongovernmental groups, attended Wednesday's meeting at the U.S. ambassador's Moscow residence, Orlov said.

Participants included federal ombudsman Vladimir Lukin; Yury Dzhibladze, president of the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights; Sakharov museum director Sergei Lukashevsky; Kavkaz-uzel.ru editor Grigory Shvedov; Civic Assistance director Svetlana Gannushkina; and Sergei Kanayev, head of the Moscow branch of the Federation of Car Owners of Russia.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin's human rights council [complained](#) in a statement posted on the web site of the Moscow Helsinki Group that its work has been undermined after its head, Ella Pamfilova, resigned in late July for unspecified reasons. The council appealed to Medvedev to appoint a new head.

Pamfilova was widely seen as a lone critical voice in the Kremlin.

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