

Former Yukos Official Released From Prison

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A former senior employee of oil company Yukos was released from prison Wednesday after serving more than seven years on charges of stealing billions of dollars, a statement on the Khodorkovsky.ru web portal said.

Yukos' former deputy director of its external debt division, Vladimir Pereverzin, served seven years and two months in prison for a conviction of stealing and laundering \$13 billion. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison in March 2007, but his sentence was counted from December 2004 and last month it was reduced due to a change in legislation.

Multibillion-dollar tax claims against Yukos and the imprisonment of former officials, including its former owner, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, have been seen as a move by the Kremlin to punish a politically disobedient billionaire and solidify control over the strategic oil sector.

Khodorkovsky and his business partner Platon Lebedev were jailed in 2005 for eight years on fraud and tax evasion charges. The pair was then convicted again in 2007 on charges of embezzling 218 million tons of oil, a charge the former Yukos executives deny, calling it

physically impossible.

High-ranking government officials and billionaire presidential candidate Mikhail Prokhorov have called for Khodorkovsky's release in recent months. President Dmitry Medvedev said he would consider pardoning the tycoon-turned-dissident, but that Khodorkovsky would first have to admit his guilt in the crimes he was convicted of, something Khodorkovsky has refused to do.

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