

International Commission to Probe May 6 Violence

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Several international human rights groups, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have created a commission to investigate the violence at a sanctioned anti-government rally on Bolotnaya Ploshchad in Moscow last May.

The commission will assess the actions of police, the rally organizers and protesters to determine whether human rights were violated and whether Russia's international legal obligations were observed, the commission said in a [statement](#) Monday.

The body was created in response to complaints from journalists and observers to Russian and international human rights groups last year, the commission said.

Several human rights groups voiced the idea last summer that "an independent expert appraisal must be given" on the Bolotnaya events, but the commission was only formed in the past few days, Dmitry Makarov, the commission's spokesman, said by telephone.

Seven legal and human rights experts from six countries — the United States, Britain, Poland, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Moldova — have agreed to carry out the inquiry on a voluntary basis, he said.

The experts are not linked to the human rights groups that initiated the inquiry, and four of them are linked to an expert council at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The criteria for being selected for the commission included a lack of links to Russia or to "any current politics" in any country and experience in monitoring rallies and law enforcement agencies, Makarov said.

Western governments have on numerous occasions criticized what they describe as a crackdown on the Russian opposition over the last year and have mentioned specifically the arrest of protesters suspected of taking part in the May 6 clashes with police.

Victoria Nuland, spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, said in October that U.S. authorities "take concerns about ... arrest actions taken against the May 6 protestors very seriously." She added that the U.S. had shared those concerns with the Russian [government](#).

As part of the new international inquiry, official requests for comment will be sent to the rally organizers, Moscow authorities, police and the Investigative Committee, and witnesses will be questioned about the events at Bolotnaya. They will also study video records and photos from the rally.

Eleven Russian human rights groups are supporting the initiative, including the Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial.

The international inquiry will supplement another unofficial probe carried out by Russian human rights groups at the request of liberal opposition party RPR-Parnas and presented last month.

The Russian groups' investigation, which only studied testimony, photos and video records, concluded that there were no riots at the rally, as authorities have alleged, and called the criminal case against the rally organizers and participants illegal.

Police and anti-Kremlin protesters clashed at Bolotnaya Ploshchad on May 6 of last year, the day before Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as president for a third term. Hundreds of people were detained, and dozens of cops and protesters were injured.

More than 25 people have been implicated in taking part in what authorities call "riots" at that rally, after investigators detained another suspect, "anti-fascist" activist Alexei Gaskarov, late Sunday.

Three organizers are suspected of plotting the alleged unrest, including Left Front leader Sergei Udaltsov, and 23 people of taking part, including Gaskarov. Fifteen of the 26 suspects are in detention centers awaiting trial.

In addition, Udaltsov associate Konstantin Lebedev was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison last week after pleading guilty to being an organizer, and Maxim Luzyanin received 4 1/2 years

in prison in November after pleading guilty to being a participant.

Lebedev, who has been accused by his former allies of betraying them, told Kommersant-Vlast magazine in an interview published Monday that he confessed in hopes of getting a more lenient sentence, but only after seeing the confession of another suspected organizer, Leonid Razvozzhayev, also an associate of Udaltsov.

Lebedev hinted that he could not have saved Udaltsov from prison in any case but could have received a 10-year sentence himself. The charge of plotting riots carries a sentence of four to 10 years in prison.

"I ... understood perfectly that the decision was made a long time ago on the highest level," Lebedev [said](#), adding that authorities "needed Udaltsov."

Members of the non-parliamentary political opposition will hold a rally at Bolotnaya Ploshchad next Monday to commemorate the anniversary of last year's protest. City Hall has authorized the rally but said Monday that it wasn't ready to permit a march to the venue, which the opposition also wants to hold, as it did before last year's rally.

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