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Pussy Riot Members to Speak at Amnesty Concert in NYC

By Frederik Balfour January 21, 2014

Two members of the Russian feminist art collective Pussy Riot, released from prison in December under an amnesty by President Vladimir Putin, will widen their campaign for better prison conditions with a visit to the U.S. next month.

Maria Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova will appear at a concert organized by Amnesty International, Amnesty said in a statement. They will travel to New York on Feb. 4, they said in a Jan. 20 interview in Singapore, during their first trip abroad since walking free on Dec. 23.

"At the end of January we will visit Paris and Amsterdam, where we will visit prisons and meet with non-governmental organizations," Tolokonnikova said. "We are also planning to visit New York, where we will also visit prisons."

The two were in Singapore for an art awards ceremony after they were nominated for "Punk Prayer Mother of God, Put Putin Away," the 2012 video which led to their conviction for hooliganism and inciting religious hatred. The arrests came after they filmed the performance at Moscow's main Russian Orthodox church.

They will speak at the Amnesty International Bringing Human Rights Home Concert in Brooklyn on Feb. 5, joining performers including Flaming Lips, Imagine Dragons, Ms. Lauryn Hill on Feb. 5 at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, Amnesty said in a statement.

Amnesty Concert "We, more than anyone understand how important Amnesty's work is in connecting activists to prisoners," they said in the release.

During their Singapore trip the pair also met with local human rights activists.

Speaking in Russian translated into English by Tolokonnikova's husband Pyotr Verzilov, the two expressed their disappointment that the video wasn't featured in the exhibition of the Prudential Eye Awards for Contemporary Asian Art running in Singapore through Feb. 5, with organizers using another of their videos, "Kropotkin Vodka." in an e-mail, David Ciclitira, the London-based art collector who founded the awards, said the artists hadn't provided the proper file format for screening. The work, nominated for the \$20,000 prize for digital/video art, lost out to Melbourne-based artist Daniel Crooks.

Sochi Olympics Three members of Pussy Riot were imprisoned for their performance in the church, with all now having been released. The nation's supreme court has ordered a review of the prison sentence for Tolokonnikova and Alekhina at a hearing on Jan. 24.

The review represents "a sudden PR stunt before the Olympic Games by the government," they said.

Alekhina said there was little likelihood of anti-government protests during the Winter Olympics in Sochi, the Russian resort on the Black Sea, beginning on Feb. 7.

"Our president is a KGB officer and the objects he creates are objects that fall under super control and super security," she said. "So if someone wants to plan something, they better start right now because they would need some serious preparation for that."

Putin, a former KGB officer who is serving his third term as president, on Jan. 4 scrapped a total ban on protests during the Winter Games.

'Global Jail' Tolokonnikova said that Edward Snowden, the fugitive former U.S. contractor living in Russia after leaking classified National Security Agency documents, now "finds himself in the conditions of a global jail."

"If you are Snowden and a man who uncovers information and policy with the media function and comes to Russia and sees that the media and information policies work 100 times less clearer than the U.S., then it is your duty to see and uncover how they work in Russia," she said. "But obviously he cannot speak about the situation of Russia because these are the conditions of his stay."

While Putin has said Snowden is free to attend the Olympics, Tolokonnikova and Alekhina said they have other plans. "We are going to Mordovia to visit prisons," Tolokonnikova said, referring to the region about 450 kilometers (280 miles) southeast of Moscow where she spent time in a labor camp. "That is more interesting than the games."