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White House 'Deeply Disappointed' by Navalny Verdict

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The White House said on Thursday that it is "deeply disappointed" by the conviction and prison sentence handed down by a Russian court against opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which it called a politically motivated act aimed at silencing opponents of the regime in the Kremlin.

WASHINGTON, July 18 (RIA Novosti) – The White House said on Thursday that it is "deeply disappointed" by the conviction and prison sentence handed down by a Russian court against opposition leader Alexei Navalny, which it called a politically motivated act aimed at silencing opponents of the regime in the Kremlin.

"Navalny's harsh prison sentence is the latest example of a disturbing trend of government actions aimed at suppressing dissent and civil society in Russia," White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters at a briefing.

"We call on the Russian government to cease its campaign of pressure against individuals and groups seeking to expose corruption and to ensure that the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of all of its citizens including the freedoms of speech and assembly are protected and respected," he said.

A court in the city of Kirov, around 560 miles (900 kilometers) east of Moscow, on Thursday convicted and sentenced Navalny, a whistleblowing blogger and one of Russia's most prominent opposition protest leaders, to five years in prison for masterminding a 2009 embezzlement scheme involving a state-owned timber supply company in the Kirov region.

Navalny, 37, has denied the charges, claiming the trial was politically motivated.

His co-defendant Pyotr Ofitserov was sentenced to four years in prison for his part in the scheme.

US lawmakers joined the chorus of outrage over the sentences, with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. Robert Menendez, accusing Russia of "returning to its old authoritarian ways where opposition voices were silenced and trumped up charges ended in unfair verdicts, oftentimes resulting in imprisonment for the falsely accused."

"The Russian government must reverse course and end this assault on people's freedoms and right to political expression. It can begin by freeing Alexei Navalny," he said.

Sen. John McCain, an outspoken critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling the conviction "a total farce if it were not so deeply tragic, especially for Russia."

"Navalny's show trial, as well as the posthumous conviction last week of another opponent of corruption, Sergei Magnitsky, are only the most recent examples of how the Putin government seems determined to drag Russia back to some of the worst aspects of its past," McCain said, calling for the immediate release of "all of Russia's political prisoners."

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Magnitsky, a lawyer who was detained after he accused Russian officials of a \$230 million tax fraud, was convicted posthumously earlier this month on tax evasion charges. He died in a Moscow prison in 2009.

Sen. Ben Cardin slammed the charges against Navalny as “trumped up” and called the guilty verdict a “sham” that “will only embolden, not end, the growing campaigns to name and shame corrupt officials and those who blatantly betray the trust of the Russian people.”

Sen. Roger Wicker said Navalny's conviction was proof “that Russia is not committed to upholding basic human rights.”

“I stand with those Russians, like Mr. Navalny, who are committed to shining a spotlight on the oppressive Putin regime,” he said.

The guilty verdict against Navalny and Ofitserov “makes the world wonder whether Russia is more committed to attacks on political dissidence than it is to the rule of law,” said Sen. Chris Murphy, calling for Navalny to be released immediately.

Human Rights Watch called the verdict “shocking” and said the case that was built against Navalny was “part of a broader government crackdown under way in Russia to silence a fierce critic and weaken the opposition movement.”

Andrew Kuchins, director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called the verdict “very depressing.”

“It's another piece of evidence that one cannot count on an independent legal system in Russia that can arbitrarily – or not so arbitrarily, as was the case here – take you down,” he told RIA Novosti.

“Opponents of the ruling regime in Russia, this is how they're dealt with,” he said.

Updates with quote from Sen. Robert Menendez.