

# THE VOICE PROJECT

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**Mr. Juan E. Méndez**

**Special Rapporteur on Torture**

c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights  
United Nations Office at Geneva  
8-14 Avenue de la Paix  
CH-1211 Geneva 10  
Switzerland  
Email: [urgent-action@ohchr.org](mailto:urgent-action@ohchr.org)

1 October 2013

**Re: Letter regarding Nadezhda Tolokonnikova (Russian Federation)**

Dear Special Rapporteur Méndez:

The Voice Project writes to urge you, in keeping with your mandate, to give immediate attention to the alarming and potentially life threatening situation whereby Russian Federation prisoner Nadezhda Tolokonnikova is being denied access to any of her family members, her attorneys, or human rights monitors.

Nadezhda Andreyevna Tolokonnikova, 23, is a Russian conceptual artist, political activist, and member of the art collective Pussy Riot. On 17 August 2012 she was convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” for a 40 second performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, for which she was sentenced to two years imprisonment.

In an open letter released 23 September 2013 citing numerous systematic abuses and human rights violations at Penal Colony No. 14 in the Republic of Mordovia [henceforth, “PC-14”] where Ms. Tolokonnikova has been imprisoned, she declared the commencement of a hunger strike with her demand that human rights be observed at the prison.

Ms. Tolokonnikova’s letter, widely published in the international media, indicates that while imprisoned in PC-14, she and other prisoners are generally forced to work for sixteen to seventeen hours per day with no more than four hours of sleep per night. Punishments include beatings, prolonged exposure to the elements, which has in certain cases caused frostbite and necessitated amputations, or not being allowed to leave their work stations to use the bathroom. She provides an alarming account of a prisoner beaten to death and workers collapsing from exhaustion and describes the retribution taken against her by prison officials following a May 2013 complaint about the conditions at PC-14 that her attorney Dmitry Dinze filed with the prosecutor’s office. (<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/23/pussy-riot-hunger-strike-nadezhda-tolokonnikova>)

Following complaints and public statements made by lawyers and human rights activists on behalf of Ms. Tolokonnikova, members of Russia’s *Presidential Council for Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights* visited the prison camp in Mordovia. The delegation included Professor Ilya Shablinskiy, who interviewed other prisoners, confirmed Ms. Tolokonnikova’s allegations, and publicly expressed shock and dismay at the appalling conditions and practices prevalent at PC-14. (<http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2013/09/27/5671545.shtml>)

As of the evening of 25 September 2013, Ms. Tolokonnikova has been held incommunicado; both family and appointed legal representatives have been denied access to her. On 29 September 2013 the Russian Penitentiary Service reported that Ms. Tolokonnikova had been hospitalized and moved to a separate camp, Federal Agency Health Facility-21.

On 30 September, again trying to gain access to or contact with Ms. Tolokonnikova after numerous failed attempts, her husband Petya Verzilov and Attorney Rubashny Vladimir Anatolievich submitted a written request directly to camp officials citing appropriate points of law governing access to Ms. Tolokonnikova. (<http://voiceproject.org/your-voice/2013/09/30/prison-officials-again-deny-access-to-hunger-striking-nadya-tolokonnikova/>). Their petition was rejected, "In accordance with doctor's statement, meeting is denied due to the state of the inmate's health."

At this point, neither legal counsel nor family members have had contact with her for five days and are concerned about reprisals for her exposé in the form of the open letter. They are extremely concerned about her condition and treatment particularly now as she is nine days into her hunger strike, and have no way of monitoring either. (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2438900/Health-Pussy-Riot-dancer-deteriorates-hunger-strike-slave-labour-condition-Russian-jail-enters-ninth-day.html>)

The denial of access to Ms. Tolokonnikova violates recognized minimum standards of the conditions of imprisonment, such as the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment<sup>1</sup> and the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners<sup>2</sup>, which apply in Russia by virtue of the European Convention on Human Rights.<sup>3</sup>

We request that you advise the office of Russian Federation Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov and the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service to grant Ms. Tolokonnikova's family and legal representatives access to her in accordance with relevant human rights laws and standards.

If you require any further information to assist with any inquiry, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Hunter Heaney  
Executive Director  
The Voice Project

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<sup>1</sup> UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment, Adopted by General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988, Principles 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> UN Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, Adopted by the First United Nations Congress on the Prevention of Crimes and the Treatment of Offenders, held at Geneva in 1955, Economic and Social Council Resolution 63 C (XXIV) (31 July 1957) and 2076 (LXII) (13 May 1977), Rules 92-94.

<sup>3</sup> Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, entered into force 3 September 1953, ratified by Russia 5 May 1998.