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Prominent Mongolian Environmentalist Given 21-Year Jail Sentence for 'Terrorism'

By [Christina Larson](#) January 29, 2014

Tsetsegee Munkhbayar grew up raising yaks on the banks of the Onggi River, once one of Mongolia's largest sources of freshwater. Rapid growth in unregulated hydraulic mining gradually sucked many tributaries of the river dry; by 2001 all that remained were dry stream beds. Other Mongolian rivers also became badly polluted, as mining operations with minimal oversight dumped sludge and waste fluids into the parched country's precious water sources.

In the early 2000s, the herder-turned-activist co-founded the Onggi River Movement to lobby for and help enforce new environmental regulations designed to protect the landscape and nomadic herders' traditional way of life. In 2007, he was honored with the [Goldman Environmental Prize](#), arguably the most prestigious international green award. He was also named a *National Geographic* [Emerging Explorer](#), telling the magazine that his activism was motivated by two simple but inescapable questions: "If we desert our land, who will be accountable for its fate? Who will be left to stop the disastrous outcomes of irresponsible governmental policy?"

His [international honors](#) won Munkhbayar no plaudits from his own government, which is now struggling to find a balance between opening up the steppes to lucrative mining deals and protecting the local environment. By some [estimates](#), Mongolia is expected to experience the world's fastest gross domestic product growth in 2014—a red-hot 15.3 percent.

Last week, Mongolian courts sentenced Munkhbayar and four other environmental activists to startling 21-and-a-half-year jail terms for "acts of terrorism." They had brought firearms to a protest last September against [pending legislation](#) that would have undone an existing ban on mineral exploration near river heads. One round of shots was [fired](#), whether accidentally or intentionally; no one was injured.

Human rights groups consider the sentence unusually harsh. Enkhbat Toochoog, of the Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center, [told Asian Correspondent](#) magazine: "Munkhbayar's actions highlighted the desperation of helpless Mongolian pastoralists who had no choice but to resort to an unconventional approach to defend their land, rights and way of life after exhausting all other means."

Larson is a *Bloomberg Businessweek* contributor.

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