
Government To Restart Forced Sale Of Armenian Firm

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Armenian authorities have secured a fresh court permission to auction off a company owned by an opposition-linked businessman and controversially accused of large-scale tax evasion.

The Bjni mineral water plant was put up for sale recently after failing to pay 4.2 billion drams (\$13.5 million) in fines imposed by tax authorities. An Armenian court upheld the hefty penalty on October 10 before security forces raided the company's premises in the central town of Charentsavan and forced it to halt its operations.

The Armenian Justice Ministry's Service for the Mandatory Execution of Judicial Acts (SMEJA) decided afterwards to sell off Bjni's assets in payment for the fines. The electronic auction began on December 19 but was suspended by another court several days later. The court order came in response to a bankruptcy lawsuit filed by an obscure construction firm that claimed to be owed money by Bjni.

According to the SMEJA, the court refused to declare the bottler bankrupt on December 30, giving the authorities the green light to start the forced sale anew. A spokesman for the SMEJA, Ruben Grdzelian, said the auction will resume on January 23. 'All the parties have already been informed about that,' he told RFE/RL.

But Ara Zohrabian, a Bjni lawyer, said the company has not received such a notification. He also alleged other procedural violations by the law-enforcement agency.

Bjni is one of a dozen companies making up the SIL Concern group owned by tycoon Khachatur Sukiasian and his extended family. Most of them were inspected by tax officials and charged with evading millions of dollars in taxes shortly after Sukiasian publicly welcomed former President Levon Ter-Petrosian's September 2007 return to active politics.

The Sukiasian family claims to have been the victim of a 'political vendetta' waged against it the Armenian authorities. But the latter deny any political motives behind the crackdown.

The SMEJA attracted no bids for Bjni from local or foreign companies during the first auction. None of Bjni's domestic competitors has publicly expressed an interest in buying it. The government's asking price for the company is 4.9 billion drams.
