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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kalmykia Leader Proposes Chess Center at Ground Zero

By Nabi Abdullaev

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Bette Cassaro of Woodside, N.Y., shielding Mohammad Abdul Awal of Queens, N.Y., from foot traffic as he prays during a Sept. 11 rally supporting an Islamic center near ground zero. Thousands of kilome
David Goldman

Kalmykia's leader said Thursday that a World Chess Center should be built at a site near New York's ground zero instead of an Islamic community center — and offered to buy the plot for $10 million.

Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who is also president of the World Chess Federation, or FIDE, said he made the offer in letters sent to New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the land's owners this week.

"The amount of $10 million was set because last week American billionaire Donald Trump made a similar offer for $7.5 million, and we've decided to outbid him," Ilyumzhinov said, according to RIA-Novosti.

A fierce controversy is raging in the United States over plans to build an Islamic center at the site, located two blocks away from where the twin World Trade Center towers were destroyed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Ilyumzhinov, who is Buddhist and claims to have been abducted by aliens, said FIDE would build a World Chess Center and a World Chess Academy if it secured the Manhattan site.

Ilyumzhinov will leave his post as Kalmykia's leader when his fourth term expires next month. In the meantime, he is fighting to hang on to his job at FIDE, a position he has held since 1995. He faces strong competition from former chess champion Anatoly Karpov in FIDE elections later this month.

Ilyumzhinov, a wealthy businessman and one of Russia's most flamboyant politicians, said in an interview broadcast on state television earlier this year that he was briefly abducted from his Moscow apartment by extraterrestrials and given a tour of their spacecraft in 1997.

Bloomberg's office had no immediate comment on Ilyumzhinov's proposal.

Ilyumzhinov said FIDE was waiting for a reply.

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