The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

City Denies Police Will Target Protester Camp

By Jonathan Earle

May 14, 2012



A reporter interviews a protester at Chistiye Prudy, where the number or protesters fluctuates between a few dozen and more than a thousand.

A senior city official denied Monday that plans were afoot to close an opposition protest camp on Chistiye Prudy, now in its sixth day.

"The event on Chistiye Prudy is still technically a street festival, which doesn't require permission from City Hall," said Alexei Maiorov, head of the city's regional security department, according to Interfax.

Speculation that police were preparing to clear the camp, whose population ranges from a few dozen to a few hundred protesters, has raged in recent days, fueled by reports of complaints from local residents.

Further rattling protesters' nerves, OMON riot police and regular officers briefly visited the

camp on Monday and asked protesters to move off the grass.

City Hall has estimated that 1 million rubles ($33,000) in damages have been inflicted to the grass around the statue of Kazakh poet-philosopher Abai Qunanbayuli, now a protest icon, RIA-Novosti reported.

City Hall is exploring possible sites for what's being dubbed Moscow's Hyde Park — a permanent space for political gatherings. A list of proposed sites, including Gorky Park and Luzhniki, will be published within the next two days, Maiorov said.

Protesters, meanwhile, have rejected an offer from Mayor Sergei Sobyanin to move the Chistiye Prudy camp to Gorky Park, Dozhd television said Monday. Sobyanin, in an interview with Dozhd over the weekend, also declined to accept or reject an invitation to visit Chistiye Prudy.

Protesters say the fledgling outpost, a continuation of the massive May 6 rally against President Vladimir Putin's inauguration that erupted in violence, will last until their demands for democratic reforms are met.

The May 6 rally, like large protests in December and February, was promoted on Facebook and other social networks — and a United Russia deputy in the State Duma has asked Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to take steps against the owners and users of social network accounts linked to the clashes.

Facebook and Twitter "effectively became instruments for coordinating extremist activities," Deputy Alexander Khinshtein wrote in the request, Interfax reported Monday.

Undeterred by a possible check, the opposition has set up a Facebook page for a mass rally on the Russia Day holiday on June 12. About 1,000 people had signed up to attend as of Monday afternoon.

"I'm sure there will be many entertaining and invariably dramatic events in Moscow until then," journalist Sergei Parkhomenko, a co-organizer of the opposition protests, wrote on his Facebook page.

Prosecutors have closed a criminal case against a riot policeman accused of kicking a pregnant woman during the May 6 rally after it emerged that the woman was in fact a student named Nikolai, the Prosecutor General's Office said in a statement.

A YouTube video of the incident, in which a riot policeman appears to strike a protester out of spite, caused a firestorm on the opposition blogosphere, which has been buzzing with allegations of police brutality in recent days.

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