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Orthodox Clergyman Wants Guards at Holy Sites

By Jonathan Earle

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High-ranking church official Vsevolod Chaplin

A week after three punk-rock protesters were imprisoned for performing in a church, a Russian Orthodox official has thrown his weight behind a controversial proposal for brigades of the faithful to police holy sites.

"I think it's a step in the right direction," Father Vsevolod Chaplin said Wednesday night. "I hope that Russian Orthodox believers will unite to uphold the law and defend many sacred sites," RIA-Novosti reported.

Earlier the conservative militia-like clan Svyataya Rus, or "Holy Rus," made the proposal, which faced withering criticism from human rights activists such as Memorial's Lyudmila Alexeyeva.

"They say they want to prevent blasphemy. Does that mean they'll punish anybody who

doesn't cross himself in front of a church?" Alexeyeva said by telephone Thursday. "We have enough security services in this country already."

Human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin said the idea was both "terrible" and unconstitutional. "Only the state has the constitutional right to use violence," he told RIA-Novosti.

But Svyataya Rus leader Ivan Otrakovsky said critics were misinformed about the project, which involves more than 100 volunteers and is already under way in Moscow.

Brigades aren't roaming the streets, as some news reports suggested, but rather standing guard at churches, monasteries, cemeteries and other holy sites, typically after hours, he said.

Vandalism and blasphemy are a major problem, and the project is part of a broader effort to promote religious values, Otrakovsky added.

"It's the beginning of a movement to unite Orthodox believers against drunkenness, prostitution and other vices," he said by telephone Thursday.

He denied that it was a response to Pussy Riot, the punk protest band whose members were sentenced to two years in prison for a February performance at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

Critics have maintained that the church pulled strings to secure the sentence, widely condemned by Western observers.

That criticism seems to have reinforced the church's traditional siege mentality and convinced some believers to "take up arms" to defend it, said religion expert Andrei Zolotov.

"The diversity of the Orthodox community notwithstanding, there is a general sense of a changing climate," he said by telephone.

Asked how volunteers guards would react to a repeat of the Pussy Riot stunt, in which band members danced on the solea and shouted for the Virgin Mary to "cast out" President Vladimir Putin, Otrakovsky said the women would be removed quickly and without violence.

"We would take them outside," he said. "It wouldn't be appropriate to deal with them inside."

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