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Mosque Construction Halted After Protest

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About 2,000 people protested the mosque in the Mitino neighborhood.

City Hall has shelved plans to build a mosque in the Mitino area, one day after a massive unsanctioned protest by inhabitants of the northwestern neighborhood.

The decision was made by the city's urban planning commission Thursday after authorities received a large number of complaints from citizens, local prefect Vladimir Goverdovsky told reporters, Interfax reported.

About 2,000 people gathered outside a high-rise apartment complex in Mitino late Wednesday to protest the construction of a large Muslim center, to include a mosque, on a nearby field. A video posted on YouTube showed people chanting "no mosque!"

Toward the end of the three-minute clip, recorded around sunset, people sing an Orthodox prayer while Leonid Simonovich, founder of the fundamentalist Union of Orthodox Banner-

Bearers, gestures with a cross in his hand.

Police temporarily detained four participants in the unsanctioned rally for violating the administrative code. A justice of the peace is expected to fine them Friday, Interfax reported.

Police said three of the four detained are not locals but residents of different neighborhoods and of the Moscow region, prompting speculation that nationalist groups were behind the protest.

According to media reports, the rally was organized by locals over the Internet, but the presence of nationalist leaders suggested that local resistance was being used by right-wing groups.

A prominent Muslim leader criticized authorities for allowing the protest to be hijacked by nationalists.

"This is very dangerous, especially in places like Mitino," said Abdul-Wahid Niyazov, an adviser to Ravil Ganutdin, chairman of the Council of Muftis.

Niyazov said Mitino is home to a higher-than-average number of migrants, many of them Muslims. He also recalled plans to construct a mosque in the city's southeastern Tekstilshchiki district, where anti-Islamic sentiment led to similar protests in 2010. Last year, authorities said the land earmarked for that mosque would be turned into a park.

Muslim leaders have long complained that the capital's four mosques cannot accommodate the city's 2 million Muslims.

But City Hall has been reluctant to support the Council of Muftis' demands to build mid-sized prayer houses in each of the capital's 12 administrative districts while keeping the central Cathedral Mosque, currently undergoing reconstruction to hold up to 10,000 worshippers, as the main prayer house.

Instead, it approved a plan earlier this month to construct a large "Islamic Humanitarian Center" in Mitino, with an approved height of 35 meters, information that led Wednesday's protesters to denounce a 13-story mosque.

The Mitino construction was not agreed on with the Council of Muftis but with the hitherto obscure Islamic United Center of Muslim Organizations.

Niyazov said this was an artificial organization set up by the Kremlin to divide the country's Muslims. Calls to the organization's representatives listed on Islamicenter.ru were unsuccessful Thursday.

The Kremlin had earlier set up a Muslim organization known as the All-Russia Muftiat. Whether it was linked with the Islamic United Center of Muslim Organizations was unclear Thursday.

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