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Vnukovo Airport Launches $1.4Bln Terminal

By Roland Oliphant

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The authorities might have deemed Christ the Savior Cathedral as inappropriate for a Pussy Riot performance, but they have chosen it as the venue to celebrate the opening of Vnukovo Airport's long-awaited $1.4 billion Terminal A.

After six years of construction, Terminal A was fully opened at a ceremony Tuesday that was attended by industry executives and high-ranking officials.

Placido Domingo and Jose Carreras flew into town to headline a concert Wednesday evening at Christ the Savior Cathedral. The tenors will be joined by American soprano Micaela Oeste and the orchestra of the Helikon Opera.

Two members of the punk band Pussy Riot were jailed earlier this year for staging an anti-Kremlin performance in the same church in February.

Supporters decried the decision to celebrate the airport in the country's main Russian Orthodox cathedral as hypocritical.

But Transaero CEO Olga Pleshakova, who announced the event on Twitter on Tuesday, was quick to respond to critics. She said that in contrast, the tenors would not sing in an area reserved for priests, as the Pussy Riot rockers had done, but rather in another part of the building.

Terminal A was partially opened in July 2010, but it was finally put into full operation Tuesday at a ceremony attended by senior government figures, including presidential Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov, Transportation Minister Maxim Sokolov and Mayor Sergei Sobyanain.

Ivanov, who was the deputy prime minister overseeing the transportation sector when the project began in 2006, told journalists that the terminal cost 44 billion rubles ($1.4 billion), but he said only 400 million rubles had come from the federal budget.

The building will allow the airport to double its capacity to 30 million passengers year and is designed to serve Boeing 747s and the Airbus A380, a major step toward the government's goal of creating an international aviation hub in Moscow.

State-owned Vnukovo is the home base for UTair, but it has long played third fiddle to privately owned Domodedovo and state-owned Sheremetyevo.

It has grown rapidly in recent years on the back of overcrowding at its rivals in the city's north and south and a government plan to integrate all three airports into a unified hub.

Earlier this year, Lufthansa moved some flights to Vnukovo from Domodedovo, citing a flying time to Germany that is 15 minutes less as well as the airport's proximity to the Kaluga region, where several German businesses, including Volkswagen, have factories.

In October, Transaero, the country's second-largest airline, signed an agreement to increase its traffic through the airport to at least 2 million passengers a year.

An ongoing management merger between Sheremetyevo and Vnukovo is set to be wrapped up in the first half of 2013.

In the past, rivalry between federal authorities and City Hall, which controlled Vnukovo during Yury Luzhkov's 18-year reign as mayor, led to intense and sometimes underhanded competition between the two airports.

In 2010, the CEO of Sheremetyevo accused Luzhkov of using roadwork on Leningradskoye Shosse to limit access before the opening of a new terminal there.

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