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Construction Work on Church in Moscow Park Halted Amid Clashes

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Both protesters and Orthodox activists had gathered at the construction site.

More than 20 people were detained Thursday evening during a protest against the building of a church in Torfyanka Park in northeast Moscow, Russian media reported.

Shortly after the arrests were made, local authorities announced that they were halting the construction of the church pending a court ruling into the case, which has prompted clashes between protesters and Orthodox activists supporting the project.

Opponents of the building project — mostly local residents — started gathering at the building site several days ago, blocking access for construction vehicles. The protesters said building the church and the necessary infrastructure such as access roads would ruin the park, and argued that they needed a park more than they needed another church. On the other side of the debate, Orthodox Church activists also gathered at Torfyanka to express their support for the initiative.

The arrests followed an escalation of tension between the two fronts on Thursday, Gazeta.ru reported. The news website quoted the police as saying that the majority of those detained were outsiders who had arrived at the site with the aim of creating chaos. Russian news site The Village reported earlier on Thursday that officers had forcefully taken down a tent that protesters had put up on the site, and arrested three of the people opposing the construction for being under the influence of alcohol.

Four members of the radical political group Left Front were among the 21 people detained, all of whom were released early Friday morning, Gazeta.ru reported.

The regional prosecutor's office previously stated that the local authorities had violated the law by allowing the construction without the required public hearings, Gazeta.ru reported. A local judge is now expected to deliberate on the matter. On Thursday evening the region's prefecture published an online statement announcing the suspension the building project until a verdict has been reached.

The order to build the church was signed by Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin in 2013 as part of the “200 churches” program initiated in 2010 by ex-mayor Yury Luzhkov and Patriarch Kirill.

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