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Clashes Break Out Over Plans to Clear Moscow Forest

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Tensions have boiled over into violent clashes between Moscow residents protesting to save their local forest and the workers tasked with clearing it, videos that circulated online showed.

Authorities plan to cut down roughly five hectares of forest in the Troitsky Forest Park, a specially protected green area in greater Moscow, to build a new mega-school for 2,000 students roughly 30,000 square meters in size. Work to clear the forest started on Jan. 10, sparking resistance from the community.

Video published by the SOTA news website on Wednesday shows lumber workers in neon vests trying to remove local protesters, using physical force in some cases.

At least one woman was taken from the site by ambulance after allegedly being pushed by a worker and one local journalist was reportedly sprayed with pepper spray on Jan. 31.

“They've been trying to cut [the forest] down for 10 years now. There have been projects for the construction of a hotel, a maternity hospital and a road on this site. Residents held rallies, knocked doors at all levels, and it all slowed down,” a member of a local advocacy group to protect the forest told the Kommersant business daily.

The group says the construction violates several environmental laws and would harm the local ecosystem, including habitat for rare and threatened animal species.

Vladimir Zhidkin, the head of the Moscow department for the development of new territories, told Kommersant that “deforestation will not harm the urban district’s ecosystem” and all actions are approved by authorities.

Russia has seen several regional and local environmental protest movements in recent years, including mass protests across the country's far north in resistance to plans to ship Moscow's waste there.

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